Marrying Mark

Violette Kimball Dunn

CHAPTER VI

Mark knocked at Valerie's door the next morning, just as she was about to knock on his. He came in and drew her down beside him on the window seat overlooking the hotel gardens. "Just in case you have five minutes you don't know what to do with before breakfast," he said.

"If you're sure it won't be any more—" She leaned her head against his arm, and looked down on the flower beds, multicolored in the morning sunshine. But when she heard about Lucy, she sat straight up.

"How did you know?" she cried.

"Know what?"

"What I was wishing for? Ever since you brought her into the car. When I saw her in my dress, I could hardly bear it—I mean, giving her up- She's so sweet, father. And she's—oh, like one of us. So many people arn't, if you've inticed:"

"I've noticed," said Mark. "I don't want you to lose your enthusiasms, but we'll go a bit slow just the same."

"How?"

"Well—Lucy insists on our looking her up. Probably we'll do it today. The place are all near. Then she'll go home with us and try it out. Then if she doesn't like us, or we don't like her, we'll call the whole thing off."

"It'll be whether she likes us," said Valerie positively. "You'll see. I know I shall always love her. Something tells you about people. It's funny. Of course, it would be silly not to like you—"

"Is my face red!" said Mark. He jumped up and pulled her to her feet. "Do you want me to be a conceited old man with a squint in my eye from looking down on people?" She dropped behind him on their way to the elevators, eyeing his slim erectness critically. "You'll never be old, father," she said seriously. "You'll just go on and on—being you."

Lucy met them later in the hotel lobby. She made no explanation as to why she hadn't joined them for breakfast. As a matter of fact, she had got up early on purpose, preferring to conduct her business transactions alone.

She packed the primrose taffeta, the slippers, the nightgown, and the drugstore soap in a little bay Valerie had loaned her, and came down to the office and paid her bill.

After that, she had just twenty-five cents, twenty of which she exchanged for coffee and rolls at a drug-store counter on a side street.

She made some inquiries about the sale of her books, and finally ran to earth a tnmid little man in a second-hand book shop. He listened warily while she told him about the library. He seemed, Lucy decided, to be afflicted with chromic suspicion. He could never, he said commit himself without seeing the books. And even then—with times what they were—

Lucy thanked him and went back to the hotel. Even with five cent in her pocket and no sale for her books, there was an extraordinary lilt to her spirits.

She met Valerie's eager hand, and turned a cheerful grin on Mark. She had, she said, made inquiries agout towing in the Ark, and scrapping it.

"But I want to salvage the Ark," explained Mark. "You never know when we may need it. And then you may not like us, and may want to escape in the night. How would you make your get-away?"

"So what?" asked Lucy. But an unfoseen hope was stirring.

"So leave the Ark to me. I'll have it put in shape and sent home. It's a—a sort of institution. I couldn't abandon it. I mean it."

"But I can't let you," protested Lucy. "And I can't afford any more repairs. So I really don't see—"

"Look at it this way. I'm buying the Ark for the repairs. And cheap enough. I want the books too. You can buy them all back later, if you want to. But I'd feel a whole lot better about it that way. All right?"

"It's marvelous," said Lucy. She would work twice as hard with Valerie to make up for it. It was a great load off her mind. She hadn't quite realized what the Ark meant until she abandoned it by the roadside in the rain. And selling her father's books had seemed awful. Now that she was going to be a wage earner, she could as he suggested, buy the thing back.

Mark hunted up the best garage in town, and made arrangements about the Ark and about sending the books to Wide Acres. Their luggage was stowed away in the car, and they started out to hunt Lucy's references. Mark tried to laugh her out of the idea, but when he saw wha it meant to her, he decided to go through with it. They called first on the judge who meted out justice at the Allington courthouse. Allington was the county seat, and the court was in session, which was a break for Lucy.

Valerie was much impressed by the building, which was of Civil War vintage with a round and rather tarnished dome. The processes of the law terrified her slightly until she met Judge Brown who was round also, and a little like the dome, except for the tarnish.

He greeted Lucy with wheezy enthusiasm. He had gone to college with her father, and was quite definite in his opinion of the family.

"Surely that's enough," said Mark, as they came out of the musty corridors into the sunshine.

"Just one more—Mr. Barrows, over at the bank in Melton. It's only ten miles. You promised!"

They dragged Valerie away from the pigeons strutting over the grass in the courthouse square, and went back to the car.

"You never told me he was a president," said Mark an hour later. He was, he said tremendously awed by bank president. "And he's known you since you were five. Don't you feel completely vindicated by now?"

"I suppose so," said Lucy doubtfully. "I did so want you to see the dean—but if you haven't time—"

"We haven't," said Mark. "I'm a hard-working president myself. Nothing swanky, like a bank. Just a chemical company. But if I don't show up once in a while, they may throw me out on my ear."

So Lucy had to be satisfied. They drove back to Allington, to find the the van towed in and work already begun. Lucy let down the back steps and climbed aboard to pack her things.

Valerie got in after her, beginning at once to plan for future trips. The small bed that folded up against the side when not in use fascinated her. The half dozen shining pans hanging from their hooks, and the tiny oil stove, suggested incredible adventure.

They almost had to drag her away when they were ready to leave. Valerie could hear Mark talking to the head mechanic while Lucy was packing. She heard the man say something about a new engine, and saw the quite nod of Mark's head, and his quick glance at the old van. Evidently Lucy was not to know. She would never tell. If the Ark needed a new engine, it was no more than it deserved.

Back in the car again, Mark looked at his watch.

"Can pou stand another night at the hotel?" he asked. Valerie nodded with enthusiasm, but Lucy glanced with sheer panic at her purse. She could hardly tell them that besides the Ark, her capital consisted of a five-cent piece! "You see, it's almost dinner time. If we stay here, we can get an early start, and make Wide Acres probably by evening with ease—"

"Of course," thought Lucy, "he couldn't imagine anybody with only five cents. What's a ten-dollar-a night hotel to him?"

But she changed her mind later in the evening. As they left her at her door, Mark handed her an envelope. He did it so quietly that even Valerie hardly noticed. In her room, Lucy tore the envelope open. A hundred-dollar bill lay cosily inside a sheet of hotel note paper.

"Half your first month's salary in advance," Mark had written. "Just to bind the bargain. So you can't walk out in us." Then his initials. Nothing more. Lucy sank down on the tufted satin of her bed. She had never owned a hundred-dollar bill before. She felt like Crosus. Were employers often like this? she wondered.

* * *

They reached Wide Acres in time for dinner the next night. Lucy never forget her first sight of the house. Mark had told her a little about it, and she knew it was comparatively new. But as they drove up to the door, and she glimpsed its mellow brick beyond the great white pillars of the portico, it was hard to believe it hadn't been there forever.

Chiltern opened the door. The spirit in which the two men's hands met was obvious, although all Mark said was, Well, Chiltern! And Chiltern answered, "It's good to see you back, sir."

Mrs. Banwood stood, primmer than ever, in the background, waiting to be greeted. And there were the still-smiling Alice, and Katie, the other maid. Lucy was explained to them all simply as "Mrs. Tredway, who has come to us as Miss Valerie's tutor."

Lucy felt more than a little strange as she followed Mrs. Banwood to her rooms, with Valerie at their heels. What standing had a tutor? Shehad read that secretaries in great house often had their meals served upstairs, to avoid embarrassment. But what happened to tutors?

And what was she between classes? She had gathered from Mark that she would then be a sort of companion. Although she had never had a regular job before, she knew she was being overpaid for this. Two hundred dollars a month, and such a home! Well, she must try to earn it! So far, it looked like no job at all.

She had heard Mark tell Mrs. Banwood to show her several guest suites and let her choose. But she never got farther than the first one. She took one look at it, put down her purse and gloves, and said, "I like this so much, I won't look at any more, thanks."

It was a bedroom, sitting room, and bath, all done in delicate mauve and green and silver, with here and there a faint touch of blue.

"Dnner is at eight, Miss Tredway," said Mrs. Banwood. "The houseman will bring your bags immediately. Shall I send a maid to you?"

"No thanks," said Lucy. "I'm quite used to looking after myself."

Mrs. Banwood said, "Thank you," and shut the door. Lucy took off her hat and losened her flattened hair. She glanced at Valerie, who still stood in the middle of the sitting room looking critically around her.

"Wouldn't you really like to see the others?" she asked. "I could show them to you myself, you know. Maybe you'd like them better." She hope Lucy would say yes. "But couldn't possibly like anything better," said Lucy. "Your mother must have had pretty marvelous taste!" It was the first time she had mentional Valerie's mother to Valerie.

"You see, my father built this house quite a long time before he married us—" Valerie explained. "I remembers he told mother she coulddo anything she wanted to with it. And mother said it was almos t too perfect as it was, and she wouldn't dream of touching it."

"And how sensible that was!"

Valerie had accomplished a strange withdrawal at the mention of Ellen. Lucy could have understood grief. But this detachment—almost as if she spoke of some character in a story or play—was a trifle uncanny.

Valerie jumped up from the deep chair before the little wood fire. "I'll have to change," she said. "It's twenty minutes to eight."

A man knocked and came in with Lucy's bags, and she began at once to unpack.

(To be continued)

Quietly, Mark handed Lucy an env elope.

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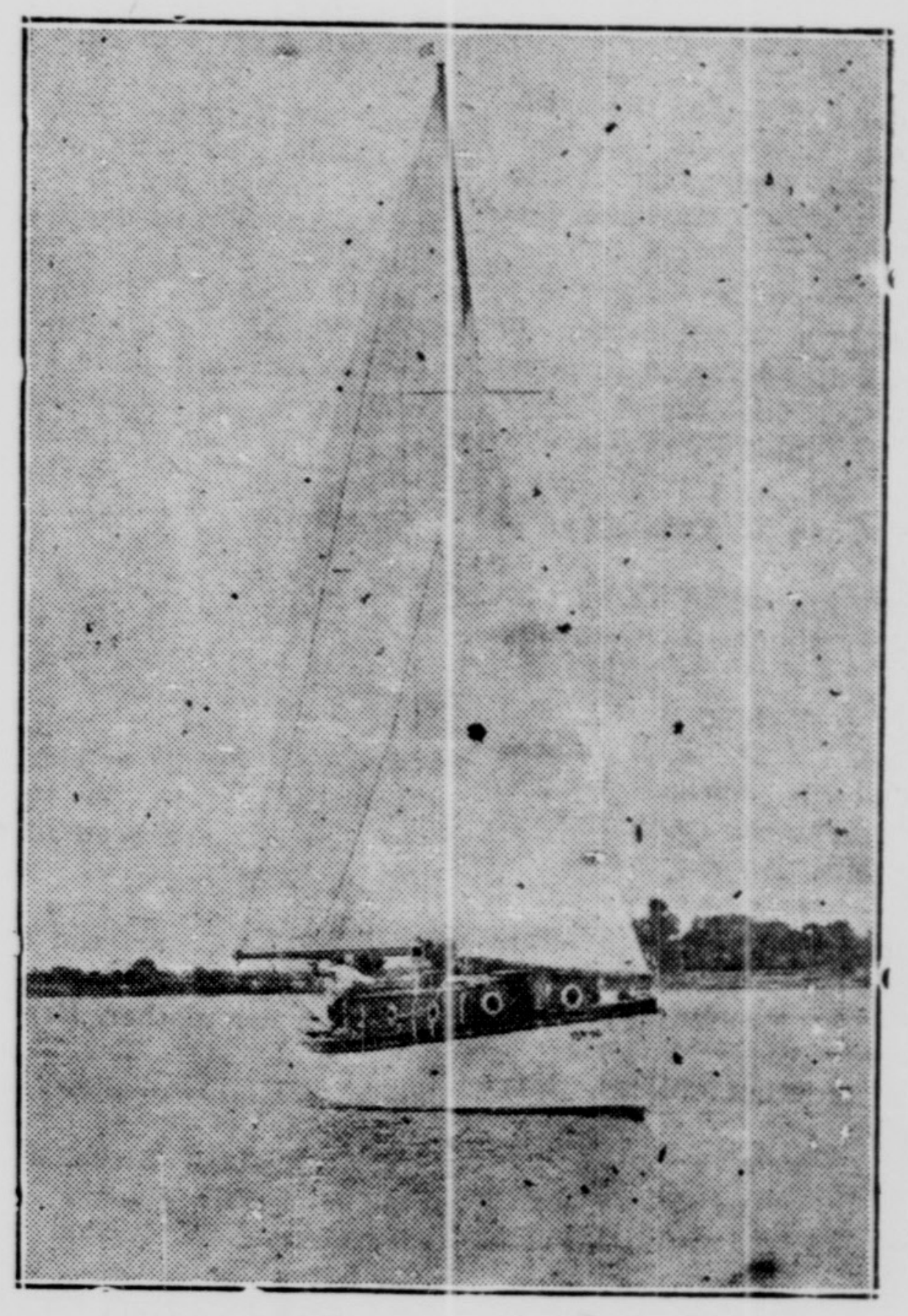

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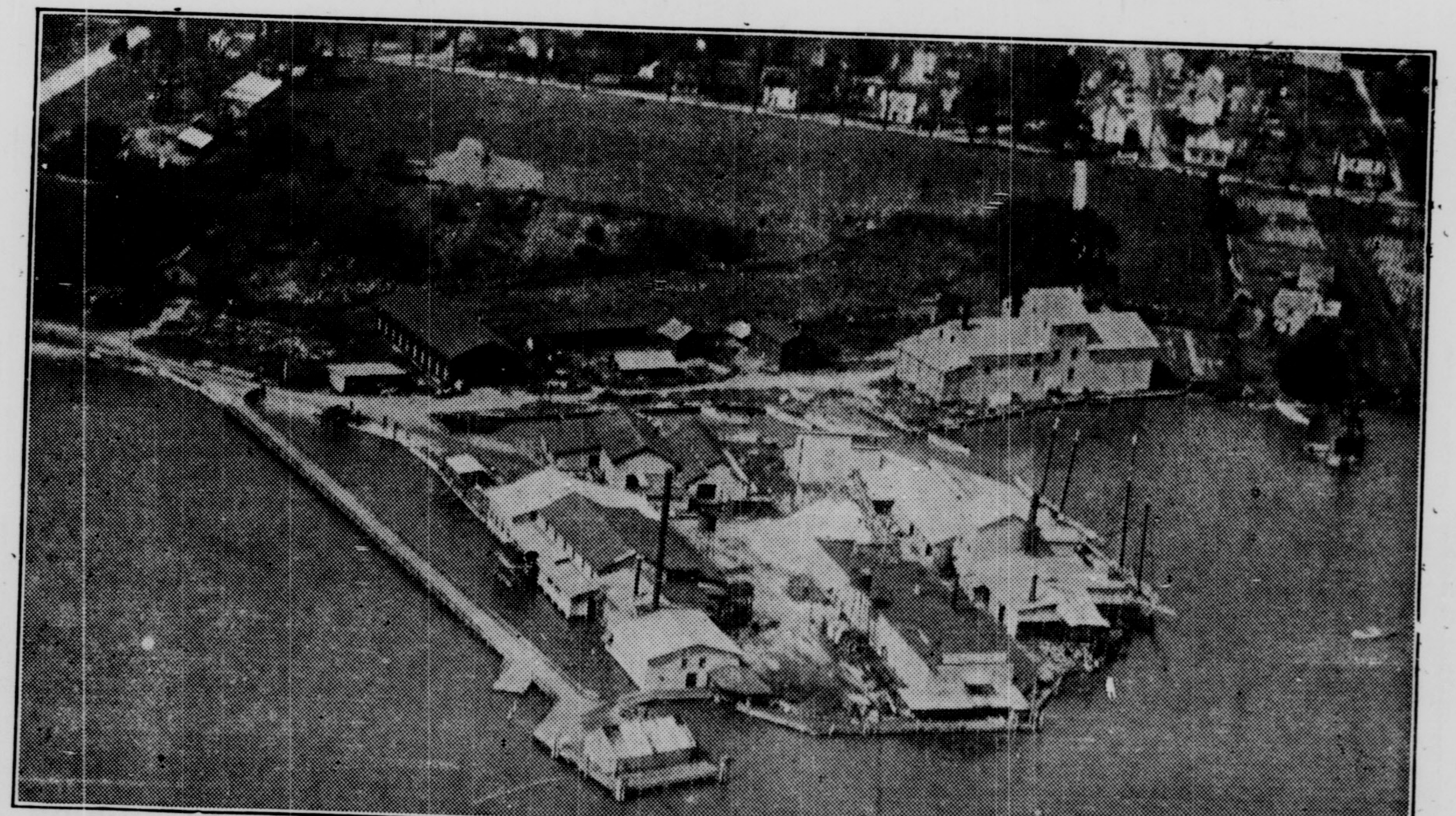

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