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Title: The Ten-foot Chain; or, Can Love Survive the Shackles? A Unique Symposium

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Release Date: June 27, 2010 [EBook #32996]

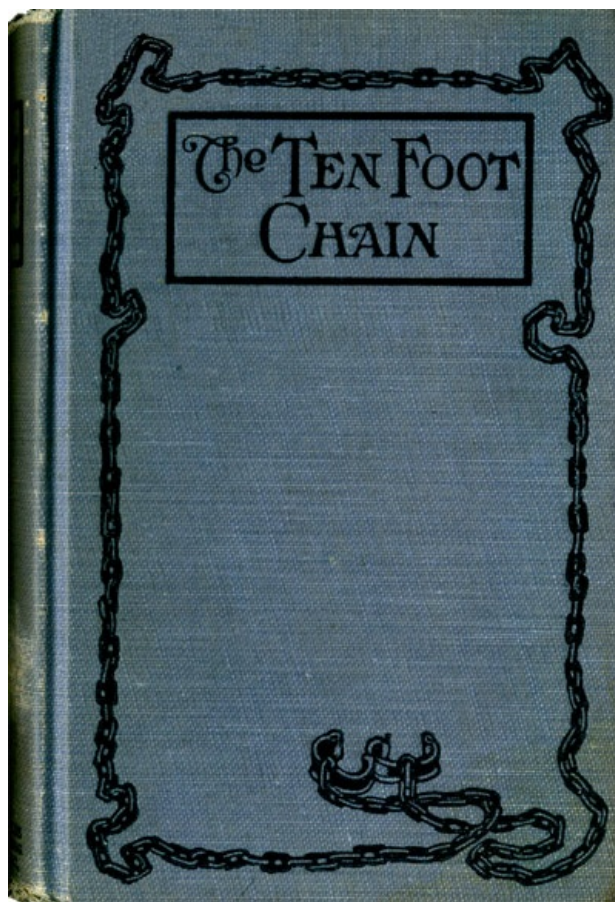
Language: English

Credits: Produced by Suzanne Shell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

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THE TEN-FOOT CHAIN

OR CAN LOVE SURVIVE THE SHACKLES?



*"WHEN I LOOK INTO YOUR FACE THE SUN
RISES AND THE BOAT OF MY LIFE ROCKS ON
THE DANCING WAVES OF PASSION."*

THE

TEN-FOOT CHAIN

OR

CAN LOVE SURVIVE THE SHACKLES?

A UNIQUE SYMPOSIUM

BY

ACHMED ABDULLAH
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E. K. MEANS
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REYNOLDS PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
NEW YORK
1920

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INTRODUCTION

SOME time ago I was dining with four distinguished writers. Needless to say where two or three authors are gathered together with a sympathetic editor in their midst, the flood-gates of fancy are opened wide.

In an inspired moment, Dr. Means tossed this "tremendous trifle" into the center of the table: "What mental and emotional reaction would a man and a woman undergo, linked together by a ten-foot chain, for three days and nights?" The query precipitated an uproar.

Captain Abdullah stepped into the arena at once, and with that élan of the heart, which is bred only in the Orient, declared if the man and the woman really loved one another, no chain could be riveted too close or too enduring to render onerous its existence. For through this world and the next, love would hold these twain in ever deeper and tenderer embrace.

Then the doctor, who claims he cuts nearer to the realities, insisted no emotion could bear such a physical impact. The reaction from such an imposed contact would leave love bereft of life, strangled in its own golden mesh. Max Brand begged to differ with both of his fellow craftsmen. With the cold detachment of a mind prepared to see all four sides of an object and with no personal animus of either prejudice or prepossession, Mr. Brand averred no blanker conclusion covered the case in question but in any given instance, the multiple factors of heredity, environment, habit, and temperament, would largely determine the final state of both the man and the woman.

Hereupon, Perley Poore Sheehan, the fourth member of the writing fraternity present, insisted on a hearing. Mr. Sheehan, nothing daunted by the naturally polygamous instincts of the male heart, insisted a good man, once in love, would and could discount the handicap of a ten-foot chain, since love was after all, as others have contended, not the whole of a man's life. To be sure it was an integral need, a recurrent appetite; the glamour and the glory, if you like, enfolding with its overshadowing wings his house of happiness. As for the woman—well, we will let Mr. Sheehan report, in person, his conviction as to the stability of her attachment.

The editor, whose business it is to keep an open mind, scarcely felt equal to the responsibility of passing judgment, where experts differed. But the discussion presented an opportunity which he felt called upon to develop. Therefore, each of the four authors was invited to present his conclusions in fiction form, the four stories to be published under the general caption "The Ten-Foot Chain." Herewith we are printing this unique symposium, one of the most original series ever presented.

Naturally, the stories are bound to provoke opinion and raise discussion. The thesis in the form presented by Dr. Means is quite novel, but the underlying problem of the stability of human affections, is as old as the heart of man. Wasn't it that prosaic but wise old poet, Alexander Pope, who compared our minds to our watches? "No two go just alike, yet each believes his own."

FIRST TALE

AN INDIAN JATAKA

BY ACHMED ABDULLAH

This is the tale which Jehan Tugluk Khan, a wise man in Tartary, and milk brother to Ghengiz Khan, Emperor of the East and the North, and Captain General of the Golden Horde, whispered to the Foolish Virgin who came to him, bringing the purple, spiked flower of the Kadam-tree as an offering, and begging him for a love potion with which to hold Haydar Khan, a young, red-faced warrior from the west who had ridden into camp, a song on his lips, a woman's breast scarf tied to his tufted bamboo lance, a necklace of his slain foes' skulls strung about his massive chest, and sitting astride a white stallion whose mane was dyed crimson in sign of strife and whose dainty, dancing feet rang on the rose-red marble pavement of the emperor's courtyard like crystal bells in the wind of spring.

This is a tale of passion, and, by the same token, a tale of wisdom. For, in the yellow, placid lands east of the Urals and west of harsh, sneering Peking, it is babbled by the toothless old women who know life, that wisdom and desire are twin sisters rocked in the same cradle: one speaks while the other sings. They say that it is the wisdom of passion which makes eternal the instinct of love.

This is the tale of Vasantasena, the slave who was free in her own heart, and of Madusadan, a captain of horse, who plucked the white rose without fearing the thorns.

This, finally, is the tale of Vikramavati, King of Hindustan in the days of the Golden Age, when Surya, the Sun, warmed the fields without scorching; when Vanyu, the Wind, filled the air with the pollen of the many flowers without stripping the trees bare of leaves; when Varuna, Regent of Water, sang through the land without destroying the dykes or drowning the lowing cattle and the little naked children who played at the river's bank; when Prithwi, the Earth, sustained all and starved none; when Chandra, the Moon, was as bright and ripening as his elder brother, the Sun.

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LET ALL THE WISE CHILDREN LISTEN TO MY JATAKA!

VASANTASENA was the girl's name, and she came to young King Vikramavati's court on the tenth day of the dark half of the month Bhadra. She came as befitted a slave captured in war, with her henna-stained feet bound together by a thin, golden chain, her white hands tied behind her back with ropes of pearls, her slim young body covered with a silken robe of the sad hue of the tamala flower, in sign of mourning for Dharma, her father, the king of the south, who had fallen in battle beneath the steel-shod tusks of the war elephants.

She knelt before the peacock throne, and Vikramavati saw that her face was as beautiful as the moon on the fourteenth day, that her black locks were like female snakes, her waist like the waist of a she-lion, her arms like twin marble columns blue-veined, her skin like the sweetly scented champaka flower, and her breasts as the young tinduka fruit.

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He looked into her eyes and saw that they were of a deep bronze color, gold flecked, and with pupils that were black and opaque—eyes that seemed to hold all the wisdom, all the secret mockery, the secret knowledge of womanhood—and his hand trembled, and he thought in his soul that the bountiful hand of Sravanna, the God of Plenty, had been raised high in the western heaven at the hour of her birth.

"Remember the words of the Brahmin," grumbled Deo Singh, his old prime minister who had served his father before him and who was watching him anxiously, jealously. "'Woman is the greatest robber of all. For other robbers steal property which is spiritually worthless, such as gold and diamonds; while woman steals the best—a man's heart, and soul, and ambition, and strength.' Remember, furthermore, the words of—"

"Enough croakings for the day, Leaky-Tongue!" cut in Vikramavati, with the insolent rashness of his twenty-four years. "Go home to your withered beldame of a wife and pray with her before the altar of unborn children, and help her clean the household pots. This is the season when I speak of love!"

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"Whose love—yours or the girl's?" smilingly asked Madusadan, captain of horse, a man ten years the king's senior, with a mocking, bitter eye, a great, crimson mouth, a crunching chest, massive, hairy arms, the honey of eloquence on his tongue, and a mind that was a deer in leaping, a cat in climbing. Men disliked him because they could not beat him in joust or tournament; and women feared him because the purity of his life, which was an open book, gave the lie to his red lips and the slow-eddy flame in his hooded, brown eyes. "Whose love, wise king?"

But the latter did not hear.

He dismissed the soldiers and ministers and courtiers with an impatient gesture, and stepped down from his peacock throne.

"Fool!" said Madusadan, as he looked through a slit in the curtain from an inner room and saw that the king was raising Vasantasena to her feet; saw, too, the derisive patience in her golden eyes.

"A fool—though a king versed in statecraft!" he whispered into the ear of Shivadevi, Vasantasena's shriveled, gnarled hill nurse who had followed her mistress into captivity.

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"Thee! A fool indeed!" cackled the old nurse as, side by side with the captain of horse, she listened to the tale of love the king was spreading before the slave girl's narrow, white feet, as Kama-Deva, the young God of Passion, spread the tale of his longing before Rati, his wife, with the voice of the cuckoo, the humming-bee in mating time, and the southern breeze laden with lotus.

"You came to me a slave captured among the crackling spears of battle," said Vikramavati, "and behold, it is I who am the slave. For your sake I would sin the many sins. For the sake of one of your precious eyelashes I would spit on the names of the gods and slaughter the holy cow. You are a light shining in a dark house. Your body is a garden of strange and glorious flowers which I gather in the gloom. I feel the savor and shade of your dim tresses, and think of the home land where the hill winds sweep.

"My love for you is as the soft sweetness of wild honey which the bees of the forest have

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gathered among the perfumed asoka flowers—sweet and warm, but with a sharp after-taste to prick the tongue and set the body eternally longing. To hold you I would throw a noose around the far stars. I give you all I have, all I am, all I shall ever be, and it would not be the thousandth part of my love for you. See! My heart is a carpet for your little lipping feet. Step gently, child!"

Vasantasena replied never a word. With unwinking, opaque eyes, she stared beyond the king, at a slit in the curtain which separated the throne-room from the inner apartment. For through the embroidered folds of the brocade, a great, hairy, brown, high-veined hand was thrust, the broad thumb wagging mockingly, meaningly, like a shadow of fate.

And she remembered the huge star sapphire set in hammered silver that twinkled on the thumb like a cresset of passion. She remembered how that hand had plucked her from amidst the horse's trampling feet and the sword-rimmed wheels of the war-chariots as she crouched low above her father's body. She remembered the voice that had come to her, clear through the clamor and din of battle, the braying of the conches, the neighing of the stallions, the shrill, angry trumpeting of the elephants—

A voice sharp, compelling, bitter—

"Captive to my bow and spear, little flower, but a slave for the king, my master. For such is the law of Hind. He will love you—not being altogether a fool. But perhaps you will not love him. Being but a stammering virgin boy, perhaps he will heap your lap with all the treasures in the world. Being an honest gentleman, perhaps he will treat you with respect and tenderness, with the sweet fairness of the blessed gods. And perhaps—even then—you will not love him, little flower.

"Perhaps you will turn to the captain of horse as the moon rises like a bubble of passion from the deep red of the sunset. Perhaps you will read the meaning of the koel-bird's love-cry, the secret of the jessamine's scent, the sweet, throbbing, winglike call of all the unborn children in the heart and body and soul of Madusadan, captain of horse."

"A bold man, this captain of horse!" Vasantasena had smiled through her tears, through the savage clang of battle.

"A reckless man—yet a humble man, little flower. Reckless and humble as the moist spring monsoon that sweeps over the young shoots of bluish-white rice. For"—here he had put her in front of him, on the curve of the peaked, bossed saddle—"will the rice ripen to the touch of the savage, clamoring monsoon?"

And he had drawn slightly away from her. He had not even kissed her, though they were shielded from all the world by the folds of the great battle flag that was stiff with gold, stiffer with darkening gore. In the fluttering heart of Vasantasena rose a great longing for this insolent warrior who spoke of love—and touched her not.

This is the tale of the grape that is never pressed, that never loses its sweetness, though white hands squeeze its pulp, day after day, night after night.

This is the tale of the book that is never read to the end, though eyes, moist and smarting with longing, read its pages till the candles gutter out in the gray dawn wind and the young sun sings its cosmic song out of the East, purple and golden.

This is the tale of love which rises like a mist of ineffable calm, then sweeps along on the red wings of eternal desire—the tale of love that is a chain forged of steel and scent, a chain of unbreakable steel mated to the pollen of the glistening areka-flower.

LET ALL THE WISE CHILDREN LISTEN TO MY JATAKA!

"See!" said Shivadevi, the old nurse, to Vasantasena, who shimmered among the green, silken cushions of her couch like a tiger-beetle in a nest of fresh leaves. "Vikramavati, the king, has bowed low before you. He has removed from your hands and ankles the pearl and gold fetters. He has taken off your robe of mourning and has thrown about your shoulders a sari woven of moonbeams and running water. He has seated you beside him on the peacock throne, as a free woman—not a slave."

"Yes," replied Vasantasena. "He has placed his head and his heart on the sill of the door of love. He brought me his soul as an offering. And I"—she yawned—"I love him not."

"He has heaped your lap with many treasures," went on the old woman. "Jasper from the Punjab has he brought to you, rubies from Burma, turquoises from Thibet, star-sapphires and alexandrites from Ceylon, flawless emeralds from Afghanistan, white crystal from Malwa, onyx from Persia, amethyst from Tartary, green jade and white jade from Amoy, garnets from

Bundelkhand, red corals from Socotra, chalcedon from Syria, malachite from Kafiristan, pearls from Ramesvaram, lapis lazuli from Jaffra, yellow diamonds from Poonah, black agate from Dynbhulpoor!"

Vasantasena shrugged her slim shoulders disdainfully.

"Yes," she said. "He put the nightingale in a cage of gold and exclaimed: 'Behold, this is thy native land!' Then he opened the door—and the nightingale flew away to the green land, the free land, never regretting the golden cage."

"He grovels before you in the dust of humility. He says that his life is a blackened crucible of sin and vanity and regret, but that his love for you is the golden bead at the bottom of the crucible. He has given you freedom. He has given you friendship. He has given you tenderness and affection and respect." [28]

"Yes," smiled Vasantasena. "He has given me his everything, his all. Without cavil, without stint. Freedom he has given me, keeping the bitter water of humility as his own portion. But all his generosity, his fairness, his humility, his decency—all his love has not opened the inner door to the shrine of my heart. In the night he comes, with the flaming torches of his passion; but my heart is as cold as clay, as cold as freezing water when the snow wind booms down from the Himalayas. The madness of the storm and the waves is upon him, but there is no answering surge in the tide of my soul. In my heart he sees the world golden and white and flashing with laughter. In his heart I see the world grim and drab and haggard and seamed with tears. For—generous, fair, unstinting—he is also selfish and foolish, being a man unwise in the tortuous, glorious ways of love. Daily he tells me that I am the well of his love. But never does he ask me if his love is the stone of my contentment." [29]

"Perhaps he does not dare," cackled the old nurse.

"Being modest?"

"Yes."

"Only the selfish are modest, caring naught for the answering spark in the heart of the loved one. And the love of woman is destroyed by humble selfishness as the religion of a Brahmin by serving kings, the milk of a cow by distant pasturage, and wealth by committing injustice. There is no worth in such wealth—nor in such love. This is Veda-truth."

And in a high, proud voice she added:

"I love Madusadan, captain of horse. I will kiss his red, mocking lips and bend to the thrill of his strong body. Pure he is to all the world, to all women—so the bazaar gossip says—but I, and I alone, shall light the lamp of passion in his heart. Free am I! But the unsung music in his heart shall be a loved fetter around mine. Clapsed in his arms, life and death shall unite in me in an unbreakable chain."

"I will bury my hands deep in the savage, tangled forest that is his soul and follow therein the many trails. I will read the message of his hooded, brown eyes, the trembling message of his great, hairy hands. His heart is a crimson malati-flower, and mine the tawny orchid spotted with purple that winds around its roots." [30]

"Gray is the hair on his temples. He is the king's senior by ten years."

"Years of wisdom," laughed Vasantasena. "Years of waiting. Years of garnering strength."

"He is not as kindly as Vikramavati, nor as great, nor as generous."

"But he is wise—wise! He knows the heart of woman—the essence, the innermost secret of woman."

"And that is—"

"Patience in achieving. Strength in holding. Wisdom in—*not* demanding unless the woman offers and gives sign."

And she went out into the garden that stretched back of the palace in wild, scented profusion, bunching its majestic, columnar aisles of banyan figs as a foil for the dainty, pale green tracery of the nim-trees, the quivering, crimson domes of the peepals bearded to the waist with gray and orange moss, where the little, bold-eye gekko lizards slipped like narrow, green flags through the golden, perfumed fretwork of the chandela bushes and wild parrots screeched overhead with burnished wings; and there she met Madusadan, captain of horse, whom she had summoned by a scribbled note earlier in the day, and her veil slipped, and her white feet were like trembling flowers, and she pressed her red mouth on his and rested in his arms like a tired child. [31]

*The road of desire runs beneath the feet all day and all night, says the tale.
There is no beginning to this road, nor end. Out of the nowhere it comes,
vanishing, yet never vanishing in the nowhere; renewing each morning, after*

nights of love, the eternal miracle, the never-ending virginity of passion.

You cannot end the endless chain of it, says the tale. You cannot hush the murmur of the sea which fills the air, rising to the white, beckoning finger of Chandra, the Moon.

Love's play is worship.

Love's achievement is a rite.

Love's secret is never read.

Always around the corner is another light, a new light—golden, twinkling, mocking, like the will-o'-the-wisp.

Reach to it—as you never will—and there is the end of the chain, the end of the tale.

LET ALL THE WISE CHILDREN LISTEN TO MY JATAKA!

"You broke your faith, faithless woman!" said Vikramavati as he saw Vasantasena in the arms of Madusadan, captain of horse.

The girl smiled.

"It was you who spoke of love," she replied, "not I."

"I tried to conquer your love by the greatness of my own love."

"As a fool tries to take out a thorn in his foot by a thorn in his hand."

"I gave you freedom. I gave you the wealth of all Hindustan, the wealth of the outer lands. I gave you my soul, my heart, my body, my strength, my ambition, my faith, my secret self."

"You gave me everything—because you love me. I gave you nothing—because I do not love you."

"Love can do the impossible," gravely said the captain of horse, while Vasantasena nestled more closely to his arms. "It was because of love that Vishnu, the Creator, changed into a dwarf and descended to the lowermost regions, and there captured Bali, the Raja of Heaven and of Earth. It was because of love that, as Ramachandra, helped by the monkey folk, he built a bridge between India and Ceylon, and that, as Krishna, he lifted up the great mountain Golondhan in the palm of his hand as an umbrella with which to shield his loved one against the splintering, merciless rays of Surya, the Sun, the jealous, yellow god."

"Love can do all things—except one. For love can never create love, wise king. Love can force the stream to flow up-hill, but it cannot create the stream when there is no water."

Silence dropped like a shadow of fate, and Vikramavati turned slowly and walked toward the palace.

"To-morrow," he said over his shoulder, in an even, passionless voice, "you shall die a death of lingering agony."

Madusadan laughed lightly.

"There is neither to-day nor to-morrow nor yesterday for those who love," he replied. "There is only the pigeon-blue of the sunlit sky, the crimson and gold of the harvest-fields, the laughter of the far waters. Love fills the cup of infinity."

"To-morrow you will be dead," the king repeated dully.

And again Madusadan laughed lightly.

"And what then, O wise king, trained in the rigid logic of Brahmin and Parohitas?" he asked. "Will our death do away with the fact that once we lived and, living, loved each other? Will the scarlet of our death wipe out the streaked gray of your jealousy? Will our death give you the love of Vasantasena, which never was yours in life? Will our death rob our souls of the memory of the great sweetness which was ours, the beauty, the glory, the never-ending thrill of fulfillment?"

"Love ceases with death."

"Love, wise king, is unswayed by the rhythm of either life—or death. Love—that surges day after day, night after night, as year after year the breast of the earth heaves to the spring song of the ripening rice, to the golden fruit of the mango groves.

"Death? A fig for it, wise king!

"Let me but live until to-morrow in the arms of my loved one, and the sweetness of our love shall be an unbreakable chain—on through a thousand deaths, a thousand new births, straight into Nirvana—into Brahm's silver soul!"

"Ahee!" echoed Vasantasena. "Let death come and the wind of life lull; let the light fail and the

flowers wilt and droop; let the stars gutter out one by one and the cosmos crumble in the gray storm of final oblivion—yet will our love be an unbreakable chain, defying you, O king—defying the world—defying the very gods—"

"But not defying the laws of nature, as interpreted by a wise Brahmin!" a shrill, age-cracked voice broke in, and Deo Singh, the old prime minister who had come down the garden trail on silent, slippered feet, stepped into the open. [36]

"No! By Shiva and by Shiva! Not the laws of nature, the eternal laws of logic, as interpreted by a priest well versed in Sruti and Smriti—in revelation and tradition. Not the laws of nature, rational and evidential, physical and metaphysical, analytical and synthetical, philosophical, and philological, as expounded by a Parohita familiar with the Vedas and the blessed wisdom of the ancient Upanishads of Hind!"

He salaamed low before Vikramavati.

"It is written in the Bhagavad Gita, the Book of Books, the Lay of Brahm the Lord, that each crime shall find condign punishment, be it committed by high caste or low caste, by prince or peasant, by raja or ryot. To each his punishment, says the Karma, which is fate!"

"And—these two?" demanded Vikramavati. "What punishment shall be meted out to the faithless woman and the faithless captain of horse, Brahmin?"

Deo Singh spread out his fingers like the sticks of a fan.

"They have chosen their own sentence, these worshipers of Kartikeya, God of Rogues and Rascals," he chuckled. "Of a chain they spoke. An unbreakable chain that defies all laws, except belike"—again he laughed deep in his throat—"the wise laws of nature. Weld them together with such a chain, forged by a master smith, made so strong that not even a tough-thewed captain of horse may break it with the clouting muscles of his arms and back. A chain, ten feet long, so that they may never be far away from each other, so that they may always be able to slake the hot, turbulent thirst of love, so that they may never have to wait for the thrill of fulfillment as a beggar waits at life's feast, so that day and night, each hour, each minute, each second they may revel in the sunshine of their love, so that never they may have to stand helpless before the flood-tide of their desire. [37]

"Grant them their wish, O king, being wise and merciful; and then lock them into a room containing the choicest food, the sweetest drinks, the whitest flowers, the softest, silkenest couch draped with purple and gold. A room such as lovers dream of—and fools! Leave them there together for three days, three nights, three sobbing, crunching, killing eternities! With no sound, no touch, no scent, no taste, but their own voices, their own hearts and souls and minds and bodies! And at the end of the three days——" [38]

"Yes?" asked Vikramavati.

"They will have suffered the worst punishment, the worst agony on earth. Slowly, slowly for three days, three nights, three eternities, they will have watched the honey of their love turn, drop by drop, into gall. Their passion—slowly, slowly—will turn into loathing; their desire into disgust. For no love in the world can survive the chain of monotony!"

THUS it was done.

A chain of unbreakable steel, ten feet long, was welded to the girl's right wrist and the man's left, and they were locked into a house—a house such as lovers dream of—that was guarded day and night by armed warriors, who let none within hailing distance, whose windows were shuttered and curtained so that not even the golden eye of the sun might look in, and around which a vast circular clearing had been made with torch and spade and scimitar so that neither bird nor insect nor beast of forest and jungle might live there and no sound drift into the lovers' room except, perhaps, the crooning sob of the dawn wind; and at the end of the third night carefully, stealthily, silently the king and the Brahmin walked up to the house and pressed their ears against the keyhole, and they heard the man's voice saying: [39]

"I love you, little flower of my happiness! I love you—you who are all my dreams come true! When I look into your face the sun rises, and the waters bring the call of the deep, and the boat of my life rocks on the dancing waves of passion!"

And then the girl's answer, clear, serene:

"And I love *you*, Madusadan, captain of horse! You have broken the fetters of my loneliness, the shackles of my longing! I waited, waited, waited—but you came, and I shall never let you go again! You have banished all the drab, sad dreams of the past! You have made your heart a prison for my love, and you have tossed away the key into the turbulent whirlpool of my eternal desire!" [40]

"Did the chain gall them?" asked the Foolish Virgin, who had come to Jehan Tugluk Khan, a wise man in Tartary and milk brother to Ghengiz Khan, Emperor of the East and the North and Captain General of the Golden Horde.

"No, Foolish Virgin," replied Jehan Tugluk Khan. "Their love could not have lived without the chain. It was their love which WAS the chain—made it, held it, welded it, eternal, unbreaking, unbreakable. Ten feet long was the chain. Each foot of steel—eternal, unbreaking, unbreakable—was a link of their love, and these links were: Passion, patience, completion, friendship, tolerance, understanding, tenderness, forgiveness, service, humor."

This is the end of the tale of Vasantasena, the slave who was free in her own heart, and of Madusadan, a captain of horse, who plucked the white rose without fearing the thorns.

And, says the tale, if you would make your chain doubly unbreakable, add another foot to it, another link. There is no word for it. But, by the strength and sense of it, you must never lull your love to sleep in the soft cradle of too great security.

For love demands eternal vigilance.

LISTEN, O AZZIA, O BELOVED, TO MY JATAKA!

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SECOND TALE

[42-45]

OUT OF THE DARK

BY MAX BRAND

THE principality of Pornia is not a large country and in the ordinary course of history it should have been swallowed entire, centuries ago, by one of the kingdoms which surround it. Its situation has saved it from this fate, for it is the buffer state between two great monarchies whose jealousy has preserved for Pornia an independent existence.

Despite its independence, Pornia has never received much consideration from the rest of Europe, and the aim of its princes for many generations has been to foist it into the great councils by a strong alliance with one of the two kingdoms to which it serves as a buffer.

The long-desired opportunity came at last in the reign of Alexander VI, who, one morning, commanded Rudolph of Herzvina to appear at the palace. As soon as the worthy old baron appeared, Alexander spoke to him as follows: "Rudolph, you are an old and respected counselor, a devoted servant of the State, and therefore I am delighted to announce that the greatest honor is about to descend upon your family, an honor so great that the entire State of Pornia will be elevated thereby. The Crown Prince Charles wishes to make your daughter his wife!"

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At this he stepped back, the better to note the joy with which old Rudolph would receive this announcement, but, to his astonishment, the baron merely bowed his head and sighed.

"Your highness," said Rudolph of Herzvina, "I have long known of the attachment which the crown prince has for my daughter, Bertha, but I fear that the marriage can never be consummated."

"Come, come!" said the prince genially. "It is a far leap indeed from Baron of Herzvina to father-in-law to Prince Charles, but there have been stranger things in history than this, though never anything that could so effectually elevate Pornia. Have no fear of Charles. He loves your daughter; he is strong-minded as the very devil; he will override any opposition from his father. As a matter of fact, it is no secret that Charles is already practically the ruler over his kingdom. So rejoice, Herzvina, and I will rejoice with you!"

[47]

But the baron merely shook his head sadly and repeated: "I fear the marriage can never be consummated."

"Why not?" said the prince in some heat. "I tell you, his royal highness loves the girl. I could read passion even in the stilted language of his ambassador's message. Why not?"

"I was not thinking of his royal highness, but of the girl. She will not marry him."

The prince dropped into a chair with jarring suddenness.

Rudolph continued hastily: "I have talked with Bertha many times and seriously of the matter; I have tried to convince her of her duty; but she will not hear me. The foolish girl says she does not love his highness."

The prince smote his hands together in an ecstasy of impatience.

"Love! Love! In the name of God, Herzvina, what has love to do with this? This is the thing for which Pornia has waited during centuries. Through this alliance I can make a treaty that will place Pornia once and forever upon the map of the diplomatic powers. Love!"

[48]

"I have said all this to her, but she is obdurate."

"Does she expect some fairy prince? She is not a child; she is not even—forgive me—beautiful."

"True. She is not even pretty, but even homely women, your highness, will sometimes think of love. It is a weakness of the sex."

He was not satirical; he was very earnest indeed. He continued: "I have tried every persuasion. She only says in reply: 'He is too old. I cannot love him.'"

An inspiration came to Alexander of Pornia. Under the stress of it he rose and so far forgot himself as to clap a hand upon the shoulder of Herzvina. In so doing he had to reach up almost as high as his head, for the princes of Pornia have been small men, time out of mind.

"Baron," he said, "will you let me try my hand at persuasion?"

"It would be an honor, sire. My family is ever at the disposal of my prince."

He answered with a touch of emotion: "I know it, Rudolph; but will you trust the girl in my hands for a number of days? A thought has come to me. I know I can convince her that this love of which she dreams is a thing of the flesh alone, a physical necessity. Come, send her to me, and I shall tear away her illusions. She will not thank me for it, but she will marry the crown prince."

[49]

"I will send her to the palace to-day."

"Very good; and first tell her why I wish to speak with her. It may be that of herself she will change her mind when she learns the wishes of her prince. Farewell."

And the prince rode off to a review of the troops of the city guard. So it was that Bertha of Herzvina sat for a long time in a lonely room, after her arrival at the palace before the door opened, a man in livery bowed for the entrance of the prince, and she found herself alone with her sovereign.

Automatically she curtsied, and he let her remain bowed while he slowly drew off his white gloves. He still wore his general's uniform with the stiff padding which would not allow his body to grow old, for a prince of Pornia must always look the soldier.

"Sit down," he ordered, and as she obeyed he commenced to walk the room.

[50]

He never sat quietly through an interview if he could avoid it; a constitutional weakness of the nerves made it almost impossible for him to meet another person's eyes. The pacing up and down gave a plausible reason for the continual shifting of his glance.

"A good day, a very good day," he said. "The hussars were wonderful."

His shoulders strained further back. The prince himself always rode at the head of the hussars; in her childhood she had admired him. He stopped at a window and hummed a marching air. That was a planned maneuver, for his back was far more royal than his face, with its tall forehead and diminutive mouth and chin. She felt as if she were in the presence of a uniformed automaton.

He broke off his humming and spoke without turning.

"Well?"

"My decision is unchanged."

"Impossible! In the length of a whole day even a woman must think twice."

"Yes, many times."

"You will not marry him?"

[51]

"I cannot love him."

He whirled, and the pale blue eyes flashed at her a brief glance which made her cringe. It was as if an X-ray had been turned on her heart.

"Love!" he said softly, and she shuddered again. "Because he is old? Bertha, you are no longer a child. Other women marry for what they may term love. It is your privilege to marry for the State. That is the nobler thing."

He smiled and nodded, repeating for his own ear: "The nobler thing! What is greater than such service—what is more glorious than to forget self and marry for the good of the thousands?"

"I have an obligation to myself."

"Who has filled you with so many childish ideas?"

"They have grown of themselves, sire."

The pacing up and down the room recommenced. "Child, have you no desire to serve me? I mean, your country?"

She answered slowly, as if feeling for her words: "It is impossible that I should be able to serve you through my dishonor. If I should marry the crown prince, my life would be one long sleep, sire. I would not dare awaken to the reality." [52]

His head tilted and he laughed noiselessly. A weakness of the throat prevented him from raising his voice even in times of the greatest excitement.

"A soul that sleeps, eh? The kiss of love will awaken it?"

He surveyed her with brief disdain.

"My dear, you scorn titles, and yet as an untitled woman you are not a match for the first red-faced tradesman's daughter. Stand up!"

She rose and he led her in front of a pier glass. Solemnly he studied her pale image.

"A sleeping soul!" he repeated.

She covered her face.

"Will that bait catch the errant lover, Bertha?"

"God will make up the difference."

He cursed softly. She had not known he could be so moved.

"Poor child, let me talk with you."

He led her back to a chair almost with kindness and sat somewhat behind her so that he need not meet her eyes. [53]

"This love you wait for—it is not a full-grown god, dear girl, but a blind child. Given a man and a woman and a certain propinquity, and nature does the rest. We put a mask on nature and call it love, we name an abstraction and call it God. Love! Love! Love! It is a pretty disguise—no more. Do you understand?"

"I will not."

She listened to his quick breathing.

"Bertha, if I were to chain you with a ten-foot chain to the first man off the streets and leave you alone with him for three days, what would happen?"

Her hand closed on the arm of the chair. He rose and paced the room as his idea grew.

"Your eyes would criticize him and your shame would fight in behalf of your—soul? And the sight of your shame would keep the man in check. But suppose the room were dark—suppose you could not see his face and merely knew that a man was there—suppose *he* could not see and merely knew that a woman was there? What would happen? Would it be love? Pah! Love is no more deified than hunger. If it is satisfied, it goes to sleep; if it is satiated, it turns to loathing. Aye, at the end of the three days you would be glad enough to have the ten-foot chain cut. But first what would happen?" [54]

The vague terror grew coldly in her, for she could see the idea taking hold of him like a hand.

"If I were to do this, the world might term it a shameful thing, but I act for Pornia—not for myself. I consider only the good of the State. By this experiment I prove to you that love is not God, but blind nature. Yes, and if you knew it as it is, would you oppose me longer? The thought grows upon me! Speak!"

Her smile made her almost beautiful.

"Sire, in all the world there is only one man for every woman."

"Book talk."

He set his teeth because he could not meet her eyes.

"And who will bring you this one man?"

"God."

Once more the soundless laugh.

"Then I shall play the part of God. Bertha, you must now make your decision: a marriage for the good of the State, or the ten-foot chain, the dark room—and love!" [55]

"Even you will not dare this, sire."

"Bertha, there is nothing I do not dare. What would be known? I give orders that this room be

utterly darkened; I send secret police to seize a man from the city at random and fetter him to a chain in that room; then I bring you to the room and fasten you to the other end of the chain, and for three days I have food introduced into the room. Results? For the man, death; for you, a knowledge first of yourself and, secondly, of love. The State will benefit."

"It is bestial—incredible."

"Bestial? Tut! I play the part of God and even surpass Him. I put you face to face with a temptation through which you shall come to know yourself. You lose a dream; you gain a fact. It is well. Shame will guard the secret in your heart—and the State will benefit. Still you see that I am paternal—merciful. I do not punish you for your past obstinacy. I still give you a choice. Bertha, will you marry as I wish, or will you force me to play the part of God?"

[56]

"I shall not marry."

"Ah, you will wait for God to make up the difference. It is well—very well; *le Dieu c'est moi*. Ha! That is greater than the phrase of Louis XIV. You shall have still more time, but the moment the sun goes down, if I do not hear from you, I shall ring a bell that will send my secret police out to seize a man indiscriminately from the masses of the city. I shall not even stipulate that he be young. My trust in nature is—absolute. *Adieu!*"

She made up her mind the moment he left the room. She drew on her cloak. Before the pier glass she paused.

"Aye," she murmured, "I could not match the first farmer's daughter. But still there must be one man in the world—and God will make up the difference!"

She threw open the door which gave on a passage leading to a side entrance. A grenadier of the palace guard jumped to attention and presented arms.

"Pardon," he said.

He completely blocked the hall; the prince had left nothing to chance. She started to turn back and then hesitated and regarded the man carefully.

[57]

"Fritz!" she said at last, for she recognized the peasant who had been a stable-boy on her father's estate before he took service in the grenadiers. "You are Fritz Barr!"

He flushed with pleasure.

"*Madame* remembers me?"

"And my little black pony you used to take care of?"

"Yes, yes!"

He grinned and nodded; and then she noted a revolver in the holster at his side.

"What are your orders, Fritz?"

"To let no one pass down this hall. I am sorry, *madame*."

"But if I were to ask you for your revolver?"

He stirred uneasily and she took money from her purse and gave it to him.

"With this you could procure another weapon?"

He drew a long breath; the temptation was great.

"I could, *madame*."

"Then do so. It will never be known from whom I received the gun—and my need is desperate—desperate!"

[58]

He unbuckled the weapon without a word, and with it in her hand she returned to the room.

There was a tall western window, and before this she drew up a chair to watch the setting of the sun.

"Will he ring the bell when the edge of the sun touches the hills or when it is completely set?" she thought.

The white circle grew yellow; then it took on a taint of orange, bulging oddly at the sides into a clumsy oval. From the gardens below came a stir of voices and then the thrill of a girl's laughter. She smiled as she listened, and, leaning from the window, the west wind blew to her the scent of flowers. She sat there for a long time, breathing deeply of the fragrance and noting all the curves of the lawn with a still, sad pleasure. The green changed from bright to dark; when she looked up the sun had set.

As she turned from the gay western sky, the room was doubly dim and the breeze of the evening set the curtains rustling and whispering. Silence she was prepared for, but not those ghostly voices, not the shift and sweep of the shadows. She turned the electric switch, closing her eyes to blur the shock of the sudden deluge of light. The switch clicked, but when she opened her eyes the room was still dark; they had cut the connecting wires.

[59]

Thereafter her mind went mercifully blank, for what she faced was, like birth and death, beyond comprehension. Noise at the windows roused her from the daze at last and she found that a number of workmen were sealing the room so that neither light nor sound could enter or escape. The only air would be from the ventilator. And still she could not realize what had happened, what was to happen, until the last sounds of the workmen ceased and the deep, dread silence began; silence that had a pulse in it—the beating of her heart.

She was standing in the middle of the room when the first shapes formed in the black night, and terror hovered about her suddenly, touching her as with cold fingers. She felt her way back to a corner and crouched there against the wall, waiting, waiting. They had seized the doomed man long before this. They must have bound and gagged him and carried him to the palace. [60]

A thousand types of men passed before her inward eye—thin-faced clerks, men as pale as the belly of a dead fish; bearded monsters, gross and thick-lipped, with thunderous laughter; laborers, stamped with patient weariness—and all whom she saw carried the sign of the beast in their eyes. She tried to pray, but the voice of the prince rang in her ears: "*Le Dieu, c'est moi!*" and when she named God in her prayers, she visualized Alexander's face, the pale, small eyes, the colorless hair, the lofty brow, the mouth whose tight lips could not be disguised by even the careful mustache. When a key turned in a door, she sprang to her feet with a cry of horror.

"It is I," said the prince.

"I am dying; I cannot stay here; I will marry whom and when you will."

"Ah, my dear, you should have spoken before sunset. I warned you, and I never change my mind. It is only for three days, remember. Also, it is in the interest of science. Beyond that, I have quite taken a fancy to playing God for you for three days. Do you understand?" [61]

The even, mocking tones guided her to him. She fell at his feet and strained his thin knees against her breast.

"Come! Be reasonable, Bertha. This is justice."

"Sire, I want no justice. For God's sake, be merciful."

She heard the shaken breath of his soundless laughter.

"Is it so? You should be grateful to me. Trust me, child, I am bringing you the love of which you have dreamed. Ha! Ha! *Le Dieu, c'est moi!*"

The clanking of the chain which he carried stilled her voice. It hushed even the thunder of her heart. She rose and waited patiently while the manacle was affixed to her wrist. The prince crossed the room and tapped on the door, which opened, and by a faint light from without Bertha discovered two men carrying a third into the room. She strained her eyes, but could make out no faces. The burden was laid on the floor; a metallic sound told her that she was fettered to the unknown.

The prince said: "You are a brave girl. All may yet be well. Then human nature is finer than I think. We shall see. As for your lover, your gift from God, he is sleeping soundly now. It may be an hour before the effects of the drug wear away. During that time you can think of love. Food will be placed three times a day within the door yonder. You can readily find it by feeling your way around the wall. Farewell." [62]

When the door closed she started to retreat to her corner, but the chain instantly drew taut with a rattle. Strangely enough, much of her fear left her now that she was face to face with the danger; temptation, the prince had called it. She smiled as she remembered. When the man awoke and learned their situation, she had no doubt as to how he would act. She had seen the sign of the beast in the eyes of many men, great and small; she had seen it and understood. The revolver might save her for a time, but what if she slept? She knew it would be almost impossible to remain awake during three days and nights.

The moment her eyes closed the end would come. It seemed better that she should fire the bullet now.

When he recovered his senses, it would be difficult to shoot effectively in the dark, for this was not the gloom of night—it was an absolute void, black, thick, impenetrable. She could not make out her hand at the slightest distance from her eyes. He might even attack her from behind and knock the revolver from her hand before she could shoot. Sooner or later the man must die. Even if she did not kill him it would be accomplished by the command of the prince at the end of the three days. [63]

Far better that it should be done at once—that he should never awaken from his sleep. She reached the decision calmly and crept forward to him. Very lightly she passed her hand over his clothes. She had to move his arm to uncover the breast over his heart; the arm was a limp weight, but the muscles were firm, round, and solid. The first qualm troubled her as she realized that this must be a young man, at least a man in the prime of his physical strength.

Then it occurred to her that often bullets fired into the breast are deflected from the heart by bones; it would be far more certain to lay the muzzle against the temple—press the trigger—the soul would depart. [64]

The soul! She paused with a thrill of wonder. A little touch would loose the swift spirit. The soul! For the first time she saw the tragedy from the viewpoint of the unknown man. His life was cut in the middle; truly a blind fate had reached out and chosen him from a whole city. Yet she was merely hastening the inevitable. She reached out and found his forehead.

It was broad and high. Tracing it lightly with the tips of her fingers she discovered two rather prominent lumps of bony structure over the eyes. Some one had told her that this represented a strong power of memory. She tried to visualize that feature alone, and very suddenly, as a face shows when a man lights his cigarette on the street at night, she saw in memory the figure of Rembrandt's "Portrait of a Young Painter." He sits at his drawing board, his pencil poised, ready for the stroke which shall give vital character to his sketch. There is only one high light, falling on the lower part of the face. Inspiration has tightened the sensitive mouth; the questing eyes peer out from the shadow of the soft cap. She broke off from her vision to realize with a start that when she touched the trigger she would be stepping back through the centuries and killing her dream of the original of Rembrandt's picture. A foolish fancy, truly, but in the dark a dream may be as true, as vivid as reality. [65]

The unconscious man sighed. She leaned close and listened to his breathing, soft, hurried, irregular as if he struggled in his sleep, as if the subconscious mind were calling to the conscious: "Awake! Death is here!"

At least there was plenty of time. She need not fire the shot until he moved. She laid the revolver on her lap and absently allowed her hands to wander over his face, lingering lightly on each feature. She grew more alert after a moment. Every particle of her energy was concentrated on seeing that face—on seeing it through her sense of touch. The blind, she knew, grow so dextrous that the delicate nerves of their finger tips record faces almost as accurately as the eyes of the normal person.

Ah, for one moment of that power! She tried her best. The nose, she told herself, was straight and well modeled. The eyes, for she traced the bony structure around them, must be large; the cheek bones high, a sign of strength; the chin certainly square and prominent; the lips full and the mouth rather large; the hair waving and thick; the throat large. One by one she traced each detail and then, moving both hands rather swiftly over the face, she strove to build the mental picture of the whole—and she achieved one, but still it was always the young painter whom great Rembrandt had drawn. The illusion would not go out of her mind. [66]

An artist's hands, it is said, must be strong and sinewy. She took these hands and felt the heavy bones of the wrist and strove to estimate the length of the fingers. It seemed to her that this was an ideal hand for a painter—it must be both strong and supple.

He sighed again and stirred; she caught up the weapon with feverish haste and poised it.

"Ah, it is well," said the sleeper in his dream.

She made sure that he was indeed unconscious and then leaned low, whispering: "Adieu, my dear."

At some happy vision he laughed softly. His breath touched her face. Surely he could never know; he had so short a moment left for living; perhaps this would pass into his latest dream on earth and make it happy. [67]

"Adieu!" she whispered again, and her lips pressed on his.

She laid the muzzle of the revolver against his temple, and, summoning all her will power, she pressed the trigger. It seemed as if she were pulling against it with her full strength, and yet there was no report. Then she realized that all her might was going into an inward struggle. She summoned to her aid the voice of the prince as he had said: "We put a mask on nature and call it love; we name an abstraction and call it God. *Le Dieu, c'est moi!*" She placed the revolver against the temple of the sleeper; he stirred and disturbed the surety of her direction. She adjusted the weapon again.

Up sprang the man, shouting: "Treason! Help!"

Then he stood silent a long moment; perhaps he was rehearsing the scene of his seizure.

"This is death," he muttered at last, "and I am in hell. I have always known what it would be—dark—utter and bitter loss of light." [68]

As his hand moved, the chain rattled. He sprang back with such violence that his lunging weight jerked her to her feet.

"It is useless to struggle," she cried.

"A woman! Where am I?"

"You are lost."

"But what has happened? In God's name, *madame*, are we chained together?"

"We are."

"By whose power? By whose right and command?"

"By one against whom we cannot appeal."

"My crime?"

"None."

"For how long—"

"Three days."

He heaved a great sigh of relief.

"It is merely some practical joke, I see. That infernal Franz, I knew he was meditating mischief! Three days—and then free?"

"Yes, for then you die."

Once more he was silent.

Then: "This is a hideous dream. I will waken from it at once—at once. My dear lady—"

She heard him advancing.

"Keep the chain taut, sir, I am armed; I will fire at the slightest provocation."

He stopped and laughed.

"Come, come! This is not so bad. You have been smiling in your sleep at me. Up with the lights, my dear. If Franz has engaged you for this business, let me tell you that I'm a far better fellow than he must have advertised me. But what a devil he is to rig up such an elaborate hoax! By Jove, this chain—this darkness—it's enough to turn a fellow's hair white! The black night gets on my nerves. Lights! Lights! I yearn to see you; I prophesy your beauty by your voice! Still coy? Then we'll try persuasion!"

His breast struck the muzzle of the revolver.

She said quietly: "If I move my finger a fraction of an inch you die, sir. And every word I have spoken to you is the truth."

"Well, well! You do this finely. I shall compliment Franz on rehearsing you so thoroughly. Is this the fair Daphne of whom he told me—"

And his hand touched her shoulder.

"By everything that is sacred, I will fire unless you stand back—back to the end of the chain."

"Is it possible? The Middle Ages have returned!"

He moved back until the light chain was taut.

"My mind whirls. I try to laugh, but your voice convinces me. *Madame*, will you explain my situation in words of one syllable?"

"I have explained it already. You are imprisoned in a place from which you cannot escape. You will be confined here, held to me by this chain, for three days. At the end of that time you die."

"Will you swear this is the truth?"

"Name any oath and I will repeat it."

"There's no need," he said. "No, it cannot be a jest. Franz would never risk the use of a drug, wild as he is. Some other power has taken me. What reason lies behind my arrest?"

"Think of it as a blind and brutal hand which required a victim and reached out over the city to find one. The hand fell upon you. There is no more to say. You can only resign yourself to die an unknown death."

He said at last: "Not unknown, thank God. I have something which will live after me."

Her heart leaped, for she was seeing once more the artist from Rembrandt's brush.

"Yes, your paintings will not be forgotten."

"I feel that they will not, and the name of—"

"Do not speak of it!"

"Why?"

"I must not hear your name."

"But you know it already. You spoke of my painting."

"I have never seen your face; I have never heard your name; you were brought to me in this room darkened as you find it now."

"Yet you knew—"

[69]

[70]

[71]

Her voice was marvelously low: "I touched your face, sir, and in some way I knew."

After a time he said: "I believe you. This miracle is no greater than the others. But why do you not wish to know my name?"

"I may live after you, and when I see your pictures I do not wish to say: 'This is his work; this is his power; this is his limitation.' Can you understand?"

"I will try to."

"I sat beside you while you were unconscious, and I pictured your face and your mind for myself. I will not have that picture reduced to reality."

"It is a delicate fancy. You are blind? You see by the touch of your hands?"

"I am not blind, but I think I have seen your face through the touch."

"Here! I have stumbled against two chairs. Let us sit down and talk. I will slide this chair farther away if you wish. Do you fear me?"

"No, I think I am not afraid. I am only very sad for you. Listen: I have laid down the revolver. Is that rash?"

"*Madame*, my life has been clean. Would I stain it now? No, no! Sit here—so! My hand touches yours—you are not afraid?—and a thrill leaps through me. Is it the dark that changes all things and gives eyes to your imagination, or are you really very beautiful?"

"How shall I say?"

"Be very frank, for I am a dying man, am I not? And I should hear the truth."

"You are a profound lover of the beautiful?"

"I am a painter, *madame*."

She called up the image of her face—the dingy brown hair, long and silken, to be sure; the colorless, small eyes; the common features which the first red-skinned farmer's daughter could overmatch.

"Describe me as you imagine me. I will tell you when you are wrong."

"May I touch you, *madame*, as you touched me? Or would that trouble you?"

She hesitated, but it seemed to her that the questing eyes of Rembrandt's portrait looked upon her through the dark—eyes reverent and eager at once.

She said: "You may do as you will."

His unmanacled hand went up, found her hair, passed slowly over its folds.

"It is like silk to the touch, but far more delicate, for there is life in every thread of it. It is abundant and long. Ah, it must shine when the sun strikes upon it! It is golden hair, *madame*, no pale-yellow like sea-sand, but glorious gold, and when it hangs across the whiteness of your throat and bosom the hearts of men stir. Speak! Tell me I have named it!"

She waited till the sob grew smaller in her throat.

"Yes, it is golden hair," she said.

"I could not be wrong."

His hand passed down her face, fluttering lightly, and she sensed the eagerness of every touch. Cold fear took hold of her lest those searching fingers should discover the truth.

"Your eyes are blue. Yes, yes! Deep-blue for golden hair. It cannot be otherwise. Speak."

"God help me!"

"*Madame?*"

"I have been too vain of my eyes, sir. Yes, they are blue."

The fingers were on her cheeks, trembling on her lips, touching chin and throat.

"You are divine. It was foredoomed that this should be! Yes, my life has been one long succession of miracles, but the greatest was reserved until the end. I have followed my heart through the world in search of perfect beauty and now I am about to die, I find it. Oh, God! For one moment with canvas, brush, and the blessed light of the sun! It cannot be! No miracle is complete; but I carry out into the eternal night one perfect picture. Canvas and paint? No, no! Your picture must be drawn in the soul and colored with love. The last miracle and the greatest! Three days? No, three ages, three centuries of happiness, for are you not here?"

Who will say that there is not an eye with which we pierce the night? To each of these two sitting in the utter dark there came a vision. Imagination became more real than reality. He saw his ideal of the woman, that picture which every man carries in his heart to think of in the times of silence, to see in every void. And she saw her ideal of manly power. The dark pressed them

together as if with the force of physical hands. For a moment they waited, and in that moment each knew the heart of the other, for in that utter void of light and sound, they saw with the eyes of the soul and they heard the music of the spheres.

Then she seemed to hear the voice of the prince: "You should be grateful to me. Trust me, child, I am bringing you that love of which you dreamed. *Le Dieu, c'est moi!*"

[76]

Yes, it was the voice of doom which had spoken from those sardonic lips. The dark which annihilates time made their love a century old.

"In all the world," she whispered, "there is one man for every woman. It is the hand of Heaven which gives me to you."

"Come closer—so! And here I have your head beside mine as God foredoomed. Listen! I have power to look through the dark and to see your eyes—how blue they are!—and to read your soul beneath them. We have scarcely spoken a hundred words and yet I see it all. Through a thousand centuries our souls have been born a thousand times and in every life we have met, and known—"

And through the utter dark, the merciful dark, the deep, strong music of his voice went on, and she listened, and forgot the truth and closed her eyes against herself.

On the night which closed the third day the prince approached the door of the sealed room. To the officer of the secret police, who stood on guard, he said: "Nothing has been heard."

"Early this afternoon there were two shots, I think."

[77]

"Nonsense. There are carpenters doing repair work on the floor above. You mistook the noise of their hammers."

He waved the man away, and as he fitted the key into the lock he was laughing softly to himself: "Now for the revelation, the downward head, the shame. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

He opened the door and flashed on his electric lantern. They lay upon a couch wrapped in each other's arms. He had shot her through the heart and then turned the weapon on himself; his last effort must have been to draw her closer. About them was wrapped the chain, idle and loose. Surely death had no sting for them and the grave no victory, for the cold features were so illumined that the prince could hardly believe them dead.

He turned the electric torch on the painter. He was a man about fifty, with long, iron-gray hair, and a stubble of three days' growth covering his face. It was a singularly ugly countenance, strong, but savagely lined, and the forehead corrugated with the wrinkles of long, mental labor. But death had made Bertha beautiful. Her eyes under the shadow of her lashes, seemed a deep-sea blue, and her loose, brown hair, falling across the white throat and breast, seemed almost golden under the light of the torch. A draft from the open door moved the hair and the heart of the prince stirred in him.

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He strove to loosen the arms of the painter, but they were frozen stiff by death.

"She was a fool, and the loss is small," sighed the prince. "After all, perhaps God was nearer than I thought. I bound them together with a chain. He saw my act and must have approved, for see! He has locked them together forever. Well, after all—*le Dieu, c'est moi!*"

THIRD TALE

[79-81]

PLUMB NAUSEATED

BY E. K. MEANS

I.

"YES, suh, I feels plum' qualified to take on a wife."

The black negro blushed to a darker hue and his face shone like polished ebony in the blazing August sun. In his embarrassment he twisted his shapeless wool hat into a wad, thrust it under his arm like a bundle, turned his back upon the white man's quizzical eyes, and sat down

upon the lowest step of the porch.

At the feet of the white man lay half a dozen pairs of handcuffs. He stooped and picked up a pair which showed rusty in the bright light, rubbed the rust off with sand-paper, squirted some oil into the mechanism from a little can, and busied himself for a few minutes seeing that his police hardware was in good condition.

The sheriff remained silent for so long that the negro imagined he had been forgotten. Then Flournoy fired a question so unexpectedly that the black man winced: "What's your name?"

[82]

"Dey calls me Plaster Sickety."

"Gosh!" the sheriff exploded. "Can any woman be induced to exchange a perfectly decent name for a smear like that?"

"Suttinly," the negro grinned. "Dat gal's name ain't so awful cute. Dey calls her Pearline Flunder."

"Plaster Sickety and Pearline Flunder—help, everybody! What sort of children will issue from a matrimonial alliance of such names?"

"I reckon our chillun will all be borned Huns, Marse John; but I cain't he'p it."

Under his manipulation the sheriff's worn handcuffs took on a polish like new. At intervals he glanced up from his task to see the sunlight spraying from the pecan-trees like water and the heat rising from the ground, visible as a boiling cloud. Once he heard an eagle scream, and glanced toward the Little Mocassin swamp to behold a black speck sail into the haze that hung like a curtain of purple and gold upon the horizon. The negro sat motionless except for glowing black eyes restless as mercury and all-perceiving.

[83]

Suddenly the bear-trap mouth of the big sheriff twisted into a little smile.

"How'd you like to give your girl one of these things for a wedding-present, Plaster?" he asked, as he tossed a polished pair of handcuffs on the step beside the negro.

"It's kinder pestered in my mind 'bout gittin' a fitten weddin'-present, Marse John, but—" Plaster rose to his feet and returned the manacles without completing his sentence.

"How much money have you got?" Flournoy asked.

"I ain't got none till yit."

"How you going to buy the license? How you going to pay the preacher?" Flournoy asked.

"Dat's whut I come to git a view from you about, Marse John. All de cullud folks gives you a rep dat you is powerful good to niggers an' I figgered dat you an' me mought fix up some kind of shake-down so I could git married 'thout costin' me nothin'."

"Don't you ever read the Bible?" Flournoy growled. "Even Adam's wife cost him a bone."

"Yes, suh," the negro grinned. "But I figger ef Sheriff Flournoy had been aroun' anywheres at dat time, maybe Adam would 'a' got off a whole lot cheaper."

[84]

"Have you got a job to support your wife?" Flournoy asked.

"Naw, suh."

"Have you got a house to live in?"

"Naw, suh."

"Where are you going to live with her—in a hollow sycamore-tree?"

"Yes, suh, I reckon so—dat is, excusin' ef you don't he'p us none."

"Where are you two idiots going to derive your sustenance—from the circumambient atmosphere?"

"Dat's de word, Marse John—dat is, excusin' ef you don't loant us a hand in our troubles," the negro murmured, wondering what the sheriff's big talk meant.

"Do you love this black girl very much?" the sheriff asked with that odd turn of tone with which every man speaks of love when he is in love with love.

"Boss," the black man answered in a voice which throbbed, "I been lovin' dat gal ever since she warn't no bigger dan—dan—dan a June-bug whut had visited accidental a woodpecker prayer-meetin'."

[85]

"Is she good to look at, Plaster?" Flournoy smiled.

"Well, suh, I cain't lie to no white man, Marse John; an' I tells you honest—she looks a whole heap better at night in de dark of de moon."

"If she ain't a good-looker, why do you love her?" Flournoy asked without a smile.

"She's good sense an' judgment, Marse John," the black man answered earnestly. "An'—an'—I

jes' nachelly loves her."

Flournoy studied a moment, twisting a pair of steel handcuffs in his giant hands. Finally he spoke:

"Plaster, I have a cabin down on the Coolie Bayou which I have given to three young married couples in succession on the condition that they live there in peace and amity one year."

"Yes, suh."

"Every couple broke up and got a divorce within nine months."

"Too bad, Marse John, dat's mighty po' luck."

"You niggers think you love each other until you get hitched and then you don't stay hitched."

[86]

"Some shorely don't—dey don't fer a fack."

"Now I make you and Pearline Flunder this offer. I will buy your marriage license, pay Vinegar Atts to marry you, bear all the expense of a church wedding, give you a job so you can support your wife, and I will make you a present of that cabin down on the Coolie Bayou if you and your wife will live together for three days without busting up in a row."

"Three days, Marse John!" the negro howled. "Boss, I motions to make it thurty years!"

"No!" Flournoy snapped. "Three days!"

"I's willin', Marse John," the negro laughed, cutting a caper on the grass.

"All right!" the sheriff said as he stooped and picked up a pair of handcuffs. "Now listen: I intend to cut the little chain on these two manacles and attach each cuff to a ten-foot chain. When you and Pearline are married, I am going to put one of these manacles around her wrist and one around your wrist"—the negro showed the whites of his eyes—"and bind you two honey-loves together with a ten-foot chain." The negro looked behind him toward the gate and the public highway, took a tighter grip upon his hat, and made a furtive step backward. "You are to remain bound together for three days." The negro smiled and stepped forward. "At the end of that time you are to come here and report, and if you agree to spend the remainder of your life together, the cabin is yours!"

[87]

"Make it a two-feets chain, Marse John, so us kin git clost to each yuther," Plaster pleaded.

"What I have spoken I have spoken," Flournoy proclaimed autocratically. "Now, go tell your sweetheart all about it."

II.

THE Big Four of Tickfall sat around a much bewhittled pine table in the Hen-Scratch saloon. The room was hazy with their tobacco smoke. Conversation languished. The session was about to adjourn until to-morrow at the same hour. Figger Bush laid his cigarette upon the edge of the table, lifted his head like a dog baying the moon, and chanted:

"O you muss be a lover of de landlady's daughter
Or you cain't git a secont piece of pie!"

[88]

Before the other could catch the tune, the green-baize doors of the saloon were thrown open and a white man entered. Every negro looked up into that granite face with its deep-set eyes, iron jaw, and rugged lines of strength and purpose, and smiled a joyful welcome:

"Mawnin', Marse John. 'Tain't no use to come sheriffin' down dis way. No niggers ain't done nothin'."

"I am hunting for a Methodist clergyman of color," Flournoy grinned.

"Boss," Vinegar Atts chuckled as he rose to his feet, "I's de blackest an' best nigger preacher whut is, an' I b'lieves in de Mefdis doctrine of fallin' from grace an' grease. Ef you misdoubts my words, ax my wife. Dat ole woman admits dat fack herse'f."

"I want you to perform a wedding ceremony at the Shoofly Church to-night at seven o'clock," the sheriff announced.

Instantly the Rev. Vinegar Atts thrust both hands into the pockets of his trousers and brought his hands out, turning out the pockets and showing them empty.

[89]

"Dar now, Figger Bush!" Vinegar bellowed. "I tole you dat de good Lawd would pervide a way fer me to pay fer dem near-booze grape-juices I been guzzlin' in yo' sinful saloom! Five dollars will sottle wid you an' leave a few change over fer seegaws."

"Who's cormittin' mattermony, Marse John?" Mustard Prophet wanted to know. "Is it one of dese here shotgun weddin's?"

"Plaster Sickety wishes to wed Pearline Flunder."

"I knows 'em," Hitch Diamond rumbled from his big chest. "De good Lawd will shore got to pervide fer dem coons like He do fer Vinegar Atts—nary one is got git-up enough to make a

livin'."

"Those young colored honey-birds are under my special care and protection," Flournoy announced, smiling. "I intend to house them and take care of them and get them work. They are an experiment."

"De trouble wid experiments is dis, Marse John," Mustard chuckled, "sometimes dey bust in yo' face."

"My plan is this," Flournoy told them. "I am going to tie those two negroes together with a ten-foot chain and they are to live in peace and amity for three days." [90]

"Lawdymussy, Marse John!" the Rev. Vinegar Atts bellowed. "Did you ever tie two cats to each yuther an' hang 'em over de limb of a tree?"

"Yes."

"Does you recommember how quick dem cats got tired of each yuther's sawsiety an' fell out wid theirselves?"

"Certainly."

Vinegar jerked a yellow bandana handkerchief from the tail of his coat and mopped the top of his bald head.

"You mought care fer dem niggers ef you ties em togedder, Marse John. But you ain't gwine be able to perfection 'em—not from each yuther," Vinegar announced as he slapped at his face with his kerchief. "I wouldn't be tied to my nigger wife wid a telephone-wire long enough to conversation de man in de moon. Naw, suh! Dat ole gal would be yankin' on dat line a catfish all de time. Whoosh!"

"I agrees wid dem religium sentiments," Hitch Diamond rumbled. "Now you example Goldie, my own wife. Dat little yeller gal's maw is a lunatic, an' Goldie ain't no lunatic, but she ain't got her right mind. I wouldn't mind bein' a Dandy lion in de lion's den, like de Bible tells about—dat would gib me a chance to fight fer my gizzard. But chained up to Goldie—" [91]

Hitch broke off, shook his head in earnest negation, rubbed one giant hand around his iron-thewed wrist as if he could feel the holy bonds of matrimony and gave utterance to one expressive word: "Gawd!"

"Hol' on, niggers!" Figger Bush exclaimed. "I don't foller you-alls in dem sentiments. Now I been married to Scootie gwine on two year an' I ain't never got too much of dat gal yit. I cherishes de opinion dat Marse John could tie our heads togedder an' I wouldn't complain none."

"I sides wid Figger Bush," Mustard Prophet grinned. "I been livin' off an' on wid Hopey fer twenty year, an' dat gal is busted stovewood over my head off an' on plenty of times, but I don't bear her no grouch. She kin always make peace by givin' me some hot biskits an' a few sirup." [92]

"You four niggers talk too much," Flournoy grinned. "I want you to get busy and decorate that Shoofly Church and pull the biggest Tickfall church wedding ever seen in the social sets of our colored circles. I'll pay for everything."

"Us fo' niggers will git our wives an' pull some kind of nice stunt ourselves, too, Marse John," Vinegar howled. "We'll fix up a good send-off fer 'em."

At seven o'clock that evening the Flournoy automobile conveyed the happy pair to the Shoofly Church. The Rev. Vinegar Atts proceeded with the ceremony until the bride sported a new ring and the two were pronounced man and wife with the solemn admonition:

"Whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder!"

Thereupon Sheriff Flournoy stepped forward and with the ease of long practice slipped a manacle upon the right wrist of the bride and another upon the left wrist of the groom and snapped the handcuffs shut.

Figger Bush stooped and lifted a long bottle from a bucket of ice. There was a loud pop, the cork struck against the ceiling, ricocheted around the walls of the room and caused a commotion by falling on Vinegar's bald head. Figger advanced with a tray containing three glasses and the sheriff toasted the bride and groom. [93]

The ten-foot chain rattled as the bride raised her manacled hand to drink.

When they marched out of the church the entire congregation formed a procession and accompanied them to their cabin on the Coolie Bayou. They noticed that Plaster Sickety picked up the chain and wrapped a turn around his bride's neck and one about his own, thus shortening the bond and bringing them close together. They clamped their arms around each other's waists, and plodded solemnly through the deep dust of the crooked highway.

"Dat nigger cain't park his wife like a new automobile an' walk off an' leave her," Vinegar chuckled.

"He ain't actin' anxious to git away—now," Hitch rumbled pessimistically.

"Not yit, but soon," Vinegar agreed.

Approaching the cabin, Plaster Sickety's voice broke into exultant song, and through the negro's wonderful gift of improvisation, he produced this neat bit:

"Dar's a Pearline pearl of price untold,
An' dat Pearline pearl cain't be bought wid gold;
An' dat Pearline pearl am good to see,
Fer dat Pearline pearl b'longs to me!"

"Listen to dat fool!" Hitch Diamond chuckled. "He's singin' like a little black angel whut had swiped de pearliest pearl offen de pearly gates!"

The bride and groom entered their cabin and softly closed the door.

Good night!

III.

"LOOKY here, Pearline, I ain't used to totin' dis ole steel band on my wrist an' it hurts my feelin's," Plaster complained as he sat at the breakfast-table before a meal which had been left on the door-step a few minutes before by Hitch Diamond.

"Don't begin to howl an' pull back like a dawg tied under a wagin, Plaster," Pearline urged prettily, as she helped herself to liberal portions of the breakfast prepared in Sheriff Flournoy's kitchen. "You won't kick about wearin' it as long as you loves me, will you?"

"No'm," Plaster said, as he lifted the chain to a more comfortable place upon the dining-table. "But I shore wish dat white man hadn't choosed such a heavy chain."

"Dis chain ain't heavy, Plaster," Pearline protested. "You hadn't oughter talk dat way. Excusin' dat, I likes dis chain—it ties us to each yuther. Don't you like it?"

"Yes'm, I shore does."

"How come you complains about it fer?"

"I ain't got no lament, Pearline—dat is, I ain't mean it dat way."

The bridegroom filled his mouth with food and for the next ten minutes ate voraciously. One watching him would draw the inference that he was not eating to enjoy the food so much as to find some occupation for his mouth beside speech.

Pearline reached out with her free hand and toyed with the chain, twisting it about her fingers lovingly, a dreamy light in her coal-black eyes.

"Us had de biggest weddin' in cullud circles, Plaster," she murmured.

"I ain't no cullud circle," Plaster mumbled, his mouth full of food. "But I reckon I got to run circles aroun' you 'slong as dis ole chain stays on. Don't rattle dat chain so loud, Pearly! Gosh! It makes a heap of racket fer its little size."

"You jes' now said it wus a big, heavy chain fer its size," his wife reminded him in a sweetly argumentative tone.

"Yes'm, it am—dis chain is bofe little an' big—fer its size," the groom amended hastily. "Stop talkin' about dis chain!"

"You started dis talk," she reminded him reproachfully. "You said it hurted yo' wrist."

There was a loud knock upon the door. Plaster sprang up to answer. The chain jerked at his wrist.

"Good gawsh!" he snorted. "Come to de door wid me, honey, so I kin open up."

"I cain't, Plaster," the bride exclaimed in a panic. "I ain't dressed fer comp'ny dis soon in de mawnin'."

"You's got on all de clothes you owns," the groom reminded her.

"Suttinly, but I ain't got no white powder on my black nose," she giggled. "Come back in de nex' room an' let me fresh up befo' we opens de door."

"I stayed in dar a plum' hour while you wus freshin' up fer yo' viteles," Plaster grumbled.

"Don't git grumped up, Plaster," Pearline urged. "You ack like yo' love is commenced to wilt aroun' de edges."

Meekly the man followed her to the bedroom and stood for fifteen minutes while the bride primped her hair, powdered her nose, adjusted her collar, fiddled with her belt, put pins in her shirt-waist, took them out and deposited them in her mouth, put them back into her waist, turned around and looked at herself in the mirror, hunted for a fresh handkerchief and could not find it, located it at last in the bosom of her waist, wondered where she had left her chewing-gum, found it on top of the box of face-powder, and finally said:

"Come on—less hurry up. Dat comp'ny will git tired waitin' fer us!"

"Dat comp'ny is gone done it," Plaster sighed. "I peeped through de crack in de door an' seed 'em. Hitch Diamond knocked fo' times, den opened de door an' picked up dem breakfast-dishes an' trod out."

[98]

"Dat's too bad," Pearline remarked with no interest whatever. She was looking at herself in the mirror. "I'd like to seen Hitchie. He use to be one of my ole sweethearts."

"Come out an' set under de tree wid me an' mebbe dat ole sweetheart of yourn will come back," Plaster suggested.

"I don't like to git out in de sunshine," the girl replied. "Dar's too much glare."

"Too much—which?" Plaster asked.

"Glare."

"Yes'm."

Plaster stood looking at her helplessly, wondering where they were going from there.

"Does you love me, Plaster?" the girl asked, siding up to him and stepping on the chain.

"Yes'm," Plaster answered as he pulled the chain from under her feet and rubbed his wrist. "Don't step on dat chain no mo'. You might break it."

"How come you don't tell me you loves me?"

"I done tole you 'bout fawty times dis mawnin'," Plaster reminded her.

"But you ain't never tole me onless I axed you."

[99]

"Less go somewhar an' set down an' I'll tell you a millyum times," Plaster said eagerly.

"Bless Gawd, I knows you loves me a plum' plenty, but I likes to hear you tell dem words. Wait a minute till I puts—er—I b'lieve I oughter change de collar on dis dress. A clean one would make me look mo' fresher."

Plaster lingered until the woman was dressed to her fancy, resting his weight first on one impatient leg, then upon the other.

"You wastes a heap of time fixin' yo'se'f, Pearly," he sighed at last. "I hopes you'll soon git dressed up fer de day."

"You wants yo' wife to look nice, don't you?" she asked reproachfully.

"Yes'm."

"How kin I look nice 'thout takin' de time to dress?"

They went out and sat down under the pecan-tree in the "glare." Pearline seemed to have forgotten the glare. Plaster lighted a cigarette, smoked it to the end, lighted another, smoked it to the end, and lighted another. Then Pearline remarked:

"Honey, does you love me more dan you loves dem cigareets?"

[100]

"I shore does"—with moderate fervor.

"Does you love me a millyum times mo' dan you loves cigareets?"

"Suttinly."

"Den, fer gossake, throw dem cigareets away! Dey smells like some kind o' fumigate."

"I cain't do that, Pearly. Dese here smokes costes money. An' I couldn't affode to buy 'em ef I had to wuck fer de money. Dey's a weddin' present."

"Is you gwine smoke all yo' married life?"

"Yes'm."

"But you ain't gwine smoke no mo' fer de nex' three days, is you?"

"No'm."

Pearline thrust her hand into Plaster's pocket and brought forth his precious smokes. She concealed them in the mysterious recesses of her attire and Plaster sighed deeply.

Ten minutes later the girl straightened up with a fierceness that nearly snapped her spinal column.

"Fer mussy sake, Plaster Sickety! Whut is you got in yo' mouf?"

"I's nibblin' a few crumbs of terbacker, honey," Plaster said apologetically.

[101]

"My gawsh! You aim to tell me dat you *chaws*?"

"Yes'm. I chaws a little bit now an' den. It kinder helps my brains to think an' sattles my stomick."

There was a long silence. Plaster stared straight ahead of him, his jaws moving with the regularity of a ruminant cow, his eyes counting the leaves on the trees, the pickets on the broken-down fence, and estimating the number of ants crawling out of a hill. Then, unconsciously, he reached into his pocket for another cigarette. He did not find it.

He heard a suspicious sound beside him and looked at Pearline.

"Whut you cryin' about honey?"

"You tole me you loved me more dan cigareets, an' yit you cain't set by me a minute 'thout chawin' terbacker," she wailed. "You is blood kin brudder to a worm an' a goat—nothin' else chaws!"

"Lawd!" Plaster sighed in desperation. "I sees now dat I'm got to learn how to suck eggs an' hide de shells."

Suddenly a loud whoop was heard near at hand and out of the swamp came Vinegar Atts, Figger Bush, Mustard Prophet and Hitch Diamond. [102]

"Hey, niggers!" Plaster bawled. "Come up an' set down. Lawd, I nefer wus so glad to see nobody in my whole life."

"Good mawnin', Sister Pearline!" Vinegar chuckled. "How is yo'-alls enjoyin' mattermony life by now?"

"Fine," the bride smiled, with a suspicion of tears still in her eyes.

"Praise de Lawd!" exclaimed Vinegar. "I wus skeart you niggers would be fightin' by now, an' mebbe one of yous would be draggin' de yuther on de end o' dat chain—dead!"

"Naw, suh!" Plaster howled, as he snatched a cigar out of Hitch Diamond's pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "Us is gittin' along puffedekly."

Plaster snatched his cigar from his lips with his manacled hand and flourished it with a motion of broad contentment. Pearline gave the chain a quick jerk and the smoke flew from Plaster's fingers and fell over in the high grass.

"You two idjits look like a holy show to me," Figger Bush cackled. "How come you don't charge admissions to de show an' git rich?" [103]

"Us wouldn't git rich quick," Pearline giggled. Hitch Diamond had retrieved the cigar, and Pearline had taken it from him and stuck it in her hair. "You-all is de onlies' comp'ny we is had till yit."

"I hopes you niggers will stay wid us all day, brudders," Plaster exclaimed earnestly. "We wus feelin' kinder—er—me an' Pearline wus feelin' sorter—er—"

"Uh-huh," Hitch Diamond grunted knowingly. "Dat's a fack. We ole married folks onderstan's dem feelin's. I'd feel dat way mese'f ef I wus in yo' fix. I'd whet up my teeth on a brick-bat an' bite myse'f in my own gizzard an' die."

"Not me!" Figger Bush howled. "Ef I wus chained to dat little gal, I'd git me a plow-line an' wrop it aroun' our necks."

"I would, too," Vinegar bellowed. "But I'd tie de yuther eend of dat plow-line to a tree an' jump off de worl'."

"I bet Pearline don't hanker to jump offen no worl'," Mustard Prophet proclaimed. "Look at her—she's jes' as happy as ef she had sense."

The eyes of the four men turned upon the girl appraisingly. Then Pearline remembered that a few moments before she had been sniffing and shedding tears. She was sure her eyes were red, and she knew the tears had washed all the white powder off her black nose. Quickly she rose to her feet, giving the ten-foot chain a sharp jerk. [104]

"I hates to take you from yo' frien's, Plaster," she exclaimed, "but I'm got to go in. I cain't stand de glare."

Side by side they entered the cabin and the chain rattled as they shut the door.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.

IV.

"STOP scatterin' dem shavin's all over de floor, Plaster," Pearline commanded. "Ef folks comes to see us, I don't want dis house all literated up wid trash."

"I got to whittle while you sews, honey," Plaster said patiently. "I wanted to sot out in the yard, but you kep' me in de house all yistiddy afternoon because you said you had de headache from de glare."

"You kin whittle 'thout messin' up dis room," Pearline snapped.

"I likes a messy room," the man declared. "It looks like folks lived in it an' wus tol'able comfer'ble."

"You cain't mess up my house ef I got to come atter you an' clean up," the woman replied in a tone of finality.

A hound-dog stuck his wistful face into the door, seeking an invitation to enter.

"Dar's a frien' in need," the bridegroom proclaimed happily. "Come here, dawg!"

"Git out o' here!" the woman shrieked, kicking at the hound and sending him out with a howl. "I don't want dat houn' in dis house scratchin' his fleas all over de rooms. Look at de mud dat dawg tracked in. Come wadin' through de bayou an' den come trackin' through de house!"

"Dar's some advantages in livin' a dawg's life, Pearline," Plaster sighed. "Even excusin' de fleas, dar's plenty advantage. A dawg, even a married dawg, he ain't tied up all de time an' kin run aroun' some."

"You aims to say you's gittin' tired stayin' here wid me?" Pearline snapped.

"No'm. Nothin' like dat. I's happy as a mosquiter on a pickaninny's nose."

[106]

"Ef you feels tied up like a houn'-dawg in de middle of de secont day, how does you expeck to feel in de middle of de secont year?"

Plaster thought it best not to venture a reply. He looked through the open door at the hound, lying under the china-berry tree in the glare, placidly scratching fleas, bumping the elbow of his hind leg on the soft ground as he scratched.

"Don't you never answer no 'terrogations when I axes you?" Pearline asked sharply. "How you gwine feel in de middle of de secont year?"

Out of sheer perversity Plaster was disposed to tell her that he would feel dead and buried for at least a year before the time she mentioned, but instead he swallowed hard three times. His throat was dry and his tongue rasped his mouth like sandpaper. His answer, finally, was a song:

"She'll be sweeter as de days go by;
She'll git sweeter as de moments fly;
She'll git sweeter an' be dearer
As to me she draws mo' nearer—
Sweeter as de days go by."

Thereupon Pearline jumped from her chair, got strangle-hold upon her husband, sat down on him, and impressed him forcibly in the next half-hour that his wife was a heavyweight and the day was extremely warm.

[107]

Plaster made such a hit with his improvised song that he repeated it three times, then gradually eased his wife off his lap and onto a chair.

"Don't you never shave yo' face, Plaster?" the lady asked when the love scene ended. "You feels like a stubby shoe-brush."

"No'm, my whiskers don't pester me none."

"But dey looks so bad," the woman urged.

"I cain't see 'em," Plaster grinned.

"I wants you to shave eve'y day while you is married to me."

"Huh," Plaster grunted.

"An I wants you to brush up yo' clothes, Plaster," the woman told him. "You looks scandalous dusty."

"I looks as good as you does," Plaster retorted. "I's got powdered dirt on my clothes an' you's got powdered chalk on yo' nose. You looks to dang dressy fer me anyhow. I favors bein' dusty an' easy-feelin'."

The discussion ended by the appearance of three women who came to the open door from the highroad.

[108]

"Look at dat, now!" Plaster exclaimed. "Here comes three ole gals of mine. I co'ted 'em all servigerous but it didn't git me nothin'."

"Whut dey buttin' in here fer?" Pearline asked in sharp tones.

"Mebbe dey'll tell us when dey comes in," Plaster chuckled.

The three women were the wives of Hitch Diamond, Figger Bush, and Vinegar Atts. When they entered they came straight to the point.

"Plaster, us ladies wants to talk to Sister Pearline Flunder Sickety in privut."

"Dat cain't be did, sisters," Plaster answered, looking them over suspiciously. "Whut does you want to tell my wife in privut?"

"Dat's a secret," Scootie Bush giggled.

Plaster looked at the women with an earnest effort to read their intentions. He recalled certain incidents in his association with the three in the old days of happy courtship that he preferred his wife should not know. He thought he saw mischief in the eyes of each of the women, especially Scootie and Goldie, and he shook his head.

[109]

"Nothin' ain't told in privut, sisters," he announced. "Leastwise, not till after de third day."

"Does you aim to say dat I cain't conversation in privut wid my frien's?" Pearline snapped.

"No'm not perzackly dat," Plaster hastened to explain. "But it looks kinder onpossible to me as long as I'm tied up wid you on dis chain."

"Git over again dat wall while dese ladies whispers to me," Pearline replied, giving him a push.

Plaster sat down and strained his ears to hear. What he heard was spasmodic giggles. He saw mischievous glances directed to himself. Once he saw his wife look straight at him reproachfully, as if she suspected that he was trying to overhear. There was half an hour of this, then the three giggling women took their departure.

"Whut did dem nigger women want, Pearline?" Plaster demanded.

"Dat's a fambly secret," Pearline giggled.

"Does you think you oughter hab any secrets from yo' cote-house husbunt?" Plaster demanded belligerently.

[110]

"Naw, suh. Not no secrets dat stays secrets, but dis here little myst'ry will git public powerful soon."

Coming through the medium of Plaster's troubled conscience, this answer sounded ominous. Pearline picked up some sewing and Plaster reached for his unwhittled stick. He spent one half-hour in deep thought. He was sorry he had told Pearline that those three women were old sweethearts of his. He recalled that his courtship of each woman had broken up in a row and a fist-fight. It had been one-sided, the women conducting the row and doing all the fighting while Plaster endeavored to escape. Now Plaster had no other idea than that they were hot on his trail. They were planning to make his life miserable through the jealousy of his wife.

There was a loud knock on the front door. The two arose and the door opened to Vinegar Atts, Figger Bush, and Hitch Diamond.

"Sister Sickety, us three niggers is a comittee of three app'inted to wait in privut on Brudder Plaster Sickety an' hol' a secret confab wid him," Vinegar announced pompously.

[111]

"I don't allow my husbunt to hab no secrets from me," Pearline answered looking suspiciously at her old sweetheart, Hitch Diamond.

"Dis am a man's pussonal bizzness, Pearline," Hitch Diamond rumbled. "A nigger woman is got to butt out."

"But I's chained up wid Plaster," Pearline protested.

"Git over agin dat wall while dese gen'lemens whispers to me," Plaster remarked, giving her a push toward the chair which he had occupied under similar circumstances a short time before.

The three committeemen walked up close to Plaster, draped their arms over his shoulders, and talked in whispers, but guffawed out loud. Because Pearline was present their eyes irresistibly sought hers, especially when they laughed—what man can keep from looking at the woman in a room?—and Pearline inferred that they were talking and laughing about her. She strained her ears to hear, but not a word enlightened her ignorance. Then with a loud laugh the three men patted Plaster on the back and took themselves off.

"Whut did them niggers want, Plaster?" Pearline demanded in irate tones.

[112]

"Dat's a fambly secret," Plaster quoted mockingly.

"I felt like a fool wid dem mens lookin' at me an' snickerin'," the woman complained. "Wus dey talkin' about me?"

"Yes'm," the man chuckled.

This remark set Pearline to thinking about certain incidents. Hitch had been an old sweetheart, Figger Bush and Vinegar Atts had paid her courtly attentions, and some things had happened that she would rather not have to explain to her husband. There was a dismal depthless gulf of painful silence between the honeymooners for a long time. Then Pearline said with difficulty:

"I don't like de nigger mens you 'socheates wid. Dem three niggers ain't fitten comp'ny fer my husbunt."

"Dat's whut I thinks about dem three womens dat come to see you," Plaster answered. "Ef you

runs wid dat color of petticoats I shore will disrespeck you mo' dan I does now."

"I runs wid anybody I chooses," Pearline snapped.

"Me, too," Plaster retorted.

They pulled apart and the chain rattled.

They stepped back from the entrance and closed the door.

And the evening and the morning were the second day.

V.

By sleeping until the noon-hour the two love-captives shortened the third day by half.

In the two days past they had exhausted every theme of conversation, had wearied of every kind of amusement they could devise, and had pumped their hearts dry of language to proclaim and protest their affection for each other to lubricate the machinery of existence amid the friction of their disposition and temperament.

The day before Plaster had made a hit with a song, so he decided to fill every moment of that day until the sun sank below the horizon with vocal music, for song banishes conversation and song is not provocative of difference of opinion and argument—so he thought. While he and his wife were dressing, Plaster began:

"Does you know dat I am dyin'
Fer a little bit of love?
Everywhar dey hears me sighin'
Fer a little bit of love.
Fer dat love dat grows mo' strong,
Fills de heart wid hope and song,
I has waited—oh, so long—
Fer a little bit of love."

"Whut makes you sing so dang loud, Plaster?" Pearline asked wearily, as she rested her head upon her hands. "You sounds like a brayin' jackace mournin' because he done tumbled down a open well."

"One time you said you liked my singin'," Plaster retorted.

"I couldn't tell you whut I really thought about it in dem sad days," Pearline remarked.

They ate their noon meal in silence because neither could think of anything to say. Plaster had got the hook at the very beginning of his musical career, and the things he thought of to say were not fit for utterance or publication.

As they rose from the table, they looked with surprise out of the window.

A long procession of negroes approached the cabin. All were dressed in their best clothes and the Rev. Vinegar Atts was in the lead.

The bridal pair suddenly remembered something, and they stepped out on the porch to receive them as they filled the space in front of the house.

Vinegar took his famous preaching attitude in front of the porch, inflated his lungs and began:

"Brudder an' Sister Sickety, us is all rejoiced dat you two honey-loves is got mighty nigh through wid yo' honey-tower widout no fuss or fight. We welcomes you back to our sawsiety wid glad arms. We hopes dat you will love each yuther mo' or less an' off an' on ferever! We knows dat you has well earnt dis house an' lot dat Marse John Flournoy has gib you an' we cullud folks wants to make you a present of a few change so you kin buy some nice house-furnicher an' start out fresh an' new."

Thereupon Vinegar laid his stove-pipe hat upside down upon the floor of the porch, turned and surveyed the assembly while he mopped his bald head with a yellow bandana handkerchief.

"Walk right up, brudders an' sisters, an' drap yo' few change in dis stove-pipe preachin'-hat!"

They came up one by one, laughingly depositing their money, and pausing to shake hands with the bride and groom.

When the ceremony ended, Vinegar emptied his hat upon the floor of the porch, placed it upon his head with a farewell flourish, and led the negroes out of the yard.

"Dis money is de fambly secret dem three nigger womens whispered to me, honey," Pearline giggled.

"Dat's de myst'ry dem three committee fellers tole me," Plaster chuckled.

The two sat down and counted the money—twenty-five dollars and thirty cents!

"Dat thuty cents is yourn to spend foolish, Pearline," Plaster said generously as he pushed three dimes toward her and clutched with both hands at the rest.

"Hol' on nigger!" Pearline snapped. "I ain't no bayou minnow to git jes' a little nibble of dat money—half of dat cash spondulix is mine."

"Yes'm, but I is de man of de fambly an' I oughter keep it an' han' it out to you as you needs it."

"I needs my half right now," Pearline snapped, placing both her hands upon the clutching paws of Plaster Sickety. [117]

"Whut you gwine do wid twelve dollars an' fo' bits?" Plaster demanded in irate tones.

"Buy me a hat!" Pearline told him.

"You's a fool!" Plaster informed her. "Female hats ain't furnicher."

"Dis money furnishes me wid a hat," she announced positively.

Then they sat for a few minutes in silence, both keeping their hands spread out over the money.

"Whut you gwine do wid yo' twelve dollars an' fo' bits?" Pearline demanded at last.

"I figgers on buyin' a fiddle," Plaster told her. "Plenty money kin be made playin' fiddles, an' I b'lieves I could learn to fiddle ef I had a good chance."

"I ain't gwine hab no fiddlin' nigger in my house," Pearline snorted. "I's druther be married to a phoneygraft."

"You ain't gwine be married to nothin' very long ef you don't leggo dis money, nigger!" Plaster snarled.

"I is."

"You ain't."

"Don't gimme no sass." [118]

"You sassed me fust."

The woman raised one hand from the money and made an unexpected sideswipe at Plaster's jaw with her open palm. The blow landed with a smack that jarred the very marrow of his bones and keeled him over the edge of the porch to the ground. As he fell sprawling, the chain tightened and jerked Pearline off her perch and she fell to the ground with a squall. Then for ten minutes there was a Kilkenny cat scrap on the front lawn.

Pearline bit and scratched and pulled hair and tore clothes. She had decidedly the best of the rookus until her unusual activities caused her to get a twist of the chain around her neck. Plaster thanked the Lord and choked her into inaction and submission by the simple process of pretending to escape from her and thus tightening the chain.

When she was choked almost to suffocation, he edged her to the porch, lifted the twenty-five dollars and thirty cents into his own pockets, and released the chain. [119]



*"THE BLOW LANDED WITH A SMACK THAT
JARRED THE VERY MARROW OF HIS BONES
AND KEELED HIM OVER THE EDGE OF THE
PORCH TO THE GROUND."*

When Pearline recovered her breath she dropped flat upon the ground at her feet and howled like a Comanche until the going down of the sun. [121]

Plaster did not attempt to console or quiet her. When he spoke again, he reached out and touched the bawling woman with his foot.

"Git up idjit!" he exclaimed. "Marse John expects us to come an' repote to him an' git dese here handcuffs tuck off."

Sheriff John Flournoy was waiting for them as they came across his lawn to the porch where he sat.

Then for half an hour he listened to a tirade of crimination and recrimination which crackled with profane expletives like thorns under a pot. When Plaster paused to breathe, Pearline took up the complaint. When Pearline stopped from exhaustion, Plaster resumed his lamentations.

When the storm of vituperation subsided, Flournoy sat in his chair like a man who had been pounded over the head with a brick. It was some time before he could formulate his ideas. Then he spoke with difficulty.

"I judge from what I have heard that your three days' experience together has convinced you that your tastes are entirely dissimilar and your natures incompatible."

"Yes, suh, dat's c'reck." [122]

"The information you offer conveys to me the impression that a woman loves shadows, but a man loves sunshine and glare; a woman loves dress, but a man loves tobacco; a woman desires daintiness and neatness attended with any degree of discomfort, but a man prefers comfort with no matter how much litter and mess; a woman loves indoor sports, like sewing, and a man loves outdoor sports, like whittling sticks and making the acquaintance of a hound-dog with fleas on his body and mud on his feet; a man loves to sing and hear himself sing, and the woman prefers to hear some other man sing; a woman wants her female companions with their confidences and their secrets, and a man desires his male companions and their secrets, but neither party to the matrimonial alliance is willing that the partner should keep a secret. Am I right as far as I've gone?"

"Dat's right!" they said in positive tones.

"But de fuss part, Marse John, is de money!" the woman shrieked.

"Certainly," Flournoy agreed softly. "Matrimony is always a matter of money."

Then Flournoy took a key from his pocket and opened the bracelets on their wrists. The chain fell at their feet. The bride and bridegroom looked away, each ignoring the presence of the other. [123]

Plaster Sickety thrust both hands into his pockets, brought out twenty-five dollars and thirty cents and laid it into the open palm of the sheriff.

"Fer Gawd's sake, git me a deevo'ce!" he pleaded.

"Make it two, Marse John," the girl urged. "I's plum' nauseated wid dat nigger man."

The bride and bridegroom turned and walked away, choosing different paths and going in opposite directions. They did not look back.

The sheriff stooped and picked up the rattling chain.

Then he went into the house and slammed the door.

The evening and the morning were the third day, and—

FOURTH TALE

[124-127]

PRINCESS OR PERCHERON

BY PERLEY POORE SHEEHAN

I.

SOME queer things had taken place in this same hall—some very queer things; but there were indications that this present affair was going to be queerer yet.

The old duke always had been a worthy descendant of his ancestors; like them, a little mad, with flashes of genius, very fine, very brutal, a murderer at heart, with a love for poetry and philosophic speculation.

The guests were already in a smiling tremor of curiosity when they arrived. Some of them whispered among themselves:

"It's on account of the Princess Gabrielle."

"They say the duke is furious."

"Not astonishing. But—a marriage! How can there be a marriage?"

Yet it looked as if a marriage there would be. Manifestly, the hall had been prepared for some such event.

It was a chamber long, lofty and broad, walled and floored with the native Burgundy rock, richly carpeted, hung with tapestry. And down a portion of the length of this ran a wide table already spread with the viands of a wedding-feast—huge cold pasties, hams and boarheads beautifully jellied, fresh and candied fruits from Spain and Sicily, flagons and goblets of crystal, silver, and gold. [128]

What aroused curiosity and conjecture to the highest point, however, was the discovery that the immense fireplace of the hall had been transformed into a forge. It was a forge complete—bellows and hearth, anvil and tub, hammers and tongs. There was even a smutty-faced imp there to tend the forge fire, which already hissed and glowed as he worked the bellows.

"Aha! So there *was* a smith mixed up in the affair, after all!"

"*Mais oui!* Gaspard, the smith, whose forge is down there on the banks of the Rhone."

"But what does the duke intend to do?"

It was a question which more than one was asking. There was never any forecasting what a whim of the duke might lead him to do even in ordinary circumstances—declare war on France, call a new Crusade. And now, with this menace of scandal in his family! [129]

There in front of the fireplace where the forge had been set up, the valets had placed the ducal chair. All the same, the arrangements had something sinister about them. There fell a period of silence touched with panic. But not for long. Curiosity was too acute and powerful to be long suppressed. The whispering resumed:

"The duke surprised them together—the princess and her smith."

"It looks like the torture for one or both."

"They say the fellow's an Apollo, a Hercules."

"You wait until the duke—"

"Silence! He comes."

One of the large doors toward the farther end of the hall was thrown open, and through this there came a surge of music—hautboys, viols, and flutes. Two guardsmen came in, helmeted, swords drawn, and took up their stations at either side of the door.

There entered the duke.

He looked the philosopher, perhaps, if not the student—tall, bent, bony; a brush of white hair bristling over the top of his high and narrow head; a fleshless face, sardonic and humorous. The guests were pleased to see that his mood was amiable. He came forward smiling, waved his musicians into retreat; and half a dozen valets were assisting him into his chair as he greeted his guests. They all bent the knee to him. Some kissed his hand—and some he kissed, especially those who were fair and of the opposite sex. [130]

If Princess Gabrielle had shown herself fragile in the matter of her affections, well, she had come by her failing honestly.

Seated in his chair, the duke delivered himself of a little pun which convulsed his audience—something about "court and courtship": "*Je fais—la cour.*"

And with no other preliminary he spoke to a page:

"Summon *mademoiselle.*"

Then to another:

"Fetch in the smith."

There was a bitter smile on his face as he sank back into his chair and studied the forge set up in the fireplace. The imp went white under his smudge and worked the bellows until the fire on the hearth was spouting like a miniature Vesuvius. [131]

The wait was brief.

Once more the musicians struck into the royal march of Burgundy, and there was the Princess Gabrielle.

Every one who looked at her must have experienced some thrill of the heart—envy, desire, pure admiration. It was impossible to look at her without some emotion; for she was eighteen, slender, white and passionate; with dusky, copper-colored hair hanging in two heavy curls forward over her brilliantly tender shoulders; and she had a broad, red mouth, and slightly dilated nostrils; dark eyes, liquid and heavily fringed, with disquieting shadows under them.

She came forward with a number of maidens in her train, but she so dominated them that she appeared to be alone. She took her time. She was a trifle rebellious, perhaps. But she was brave, not to say bold. She tossed her head slightly. She smiled. She and her maidens, familiar with the duke's intentions, grouped themselves at one side of the improvised forge. Every one present was still looking at her when there came a rough command: [132]

"Stand aside!"

A good many of the guests were not in the habit of hearing orders except from the duke himself; but the command came again:

"Stand aside! Let me pass—me and my people!"

At that there was a rapid shifting of the crowd and a whispered cry:

"The smith! It's Gaspard the smith!"

And he attracted even more attention than the princess had done; for, manifestly, here was not only a man who could play the game of love, but could play the game of life and death as well—to shout out like this, and come striding like this into the presence of his ruler.

But he looked the part.

He was all of six feet tall, blond and supple and beautifully fleshed. He was wearing his blacksmith's outfit of doeskin and leather, but he was scoured and shaven to the pink. His great arms were bare; and the exquisitely sculptured muscles of these slipped and played under a skin as white as a woman's.

He stood there with his shoulders back, his arms folded, feet apart. But, curiously, there was no insolence in the posture. Insolence is a quality of the little heart, the little soul, and shows itself in the eyes. Gaspard the smith had gentle blue eyes, large, dark, fearless, and with a certain brooding pride in them. There may have been even a hint of virgin bashfulness in them as well, during that moment he glanced at the Princess Gabrielle. Then he had looked at the duke, and all his courage had come back to him, perhaps also a suggestion of challenge. [133]

But neither had the smith come into the ducal presence alone.

There were two old people—a man and a woman, peasants, both of them very poor, very humble, so frightened that they could breathe only with their mouths open; and so soon as they were inside the circle of guests, they had dropped to their knees. The other member of the smith's party would have done the same had he permitted. This was a girl of twenty or so, likewise a peasant, healthy, painfully abashed, but otherwise not notable. To her the smith had given a nudge and a word of encouragement, so that now she stood close to him and back of him.

"Our friends," said the duke, with studied nonchalance, "we are about to present to you the initial operation of scientific experiment. Like all scientific research, this also should be judged solely by its possible contribution to the advancement of human happiness. Ourselves, we feel that this contribution will be great. God knows it is concerned with a problem that is both elusive and poignant." [134]

All this was rather above Gaspard's head. He turned to the imp at the bellows.

"Stop blowing that fire so hard," he whispered. "You're wasting charcoal."

The duke smiled grimly.

"The problem," he continued, "is this: Can any man and woman, however devoted, continue to love each other if they are too closely held together?"

There was a slight movement among some of the younger gentlemen and ladies present—a few knowing smiles.

"There have always been those who answered *No*; there have always been those who answered *Yes*," the duke went on. "Which were right?" No answer. "My granddaughter here, while having her horse shod some weeks ago, became enamored of this worthy subject of mine." He nodded toward the smith. "She would have him. She would have no one else. We knew how hopeless would be any attempt to impose our will—in an affair of the heart." He smiled gallantly. "We are familiar with the breed." [135]

"Long live the House of Burgundy," cried the chivalrous young Vicomte de Mâcon. But the duke silenced him with a look.

"And now," said the duke, "we wish to test this so great passion of hers—test it under conditions that while apparently extraordinary are none the less classical and scientific. Our experiment is this—"

For the first time since he began to speak the duke now leaned forward, and both his face and his voice took on that quality which made his name a source of trembling from Spain to Denmark.

"Our experiment is this:

"To have the princess and her smith, whom she is so sure she loves, handcuffed and linked together by a ten-foot chain." [136]

II.

THERE was a gasp from the audience. Every one stared at the princess. Even the duke himself. Without turning his head he took her in with his furtive eyes.

"*Mlle. la Princess*," he said icily, "was good enough to insist upon the sacrifice."

At this, a stain of richer color slowly crept up the throat of the Princess Gabrielle; there came a touch of extra fire to her eyes. Perhaps she would have spoken. But the duke hadn't finished yet.

"We'll see whether she loves him so much or not," said the duke. "We'll give them three days of it—three days to go and come as they wish—and to do as they wish—together—always together—bound to each other by their ten-foot chain."

But while the excitement caused by the duke's announcement was still crisping the nerves of every one present, the smith had cast one more glance in the direction of the Princess Gabrielle. And this time their eyes met. There were those who saw a glint of terror—of delicious terror—in the eyes of the princess; and in the eyes of Gaspard a look intended to be reassuring. [137]

Then the smith had unfolded his arms, thrust them forward.

"Wait," he cried.

At that there was a fresh sensation.

For it was seen that one of his wrists—his left—was already encircled by a bracelet of shining steel, forged there of a single piece, and that to the bracelet itself there was forged a link, fine but powerful, and that other links ran back over his shoulder.

"Ha!" snarled the duke. "So you've come prepared!"

"By the grace of God!" replied Gaspard the smith, unafraid. He cast a look about him, brought his eyes back to the duke. "*Moi*, Gaspard," he said, "I forge my own chains—always! I'm a smith, I am."

The two old people kneeling just back of him began to sob and to groan. Gaspard turned and looked down at them.

"Shut up," he ordered; "I'm talking."

He smiled at the duke. He explained.

"You see, they're frightened," he said. "When I found out what your highness and your highness's lady-granddaughter were planning up here in the castle, why, I went to these old folks and told them that I wanted their daughter Susette." [138]

"I suppose you loved her," the duke put in with ironical intent.

But the smith saw no reason for irony.

"Eh, *bon Dieu!*" he ejaculated. "And save your highness's respect, we've loved each other ever since we were out of the cradle, we have. So I made the old folks consent. I'm a smith, I am. I forge my own chains. Stand around, Susette! His highness won't hurt you. Look!"

He stepped aside. He gave a gentle thrust to the girl who had been sheltering back of him. The chain rattled.

And there was another cry of surprise.

One of the girl's wrists also was ornamented with a steel handcuff tightly welded. Not only that, but to this also was attached a chain. The smith threw up his arm. It was the same chain that was welded to his own handcuff—ten feet of it, glistening steel, unbreakable.

"There's your ten-foot chain, highness," cried Gaspard. "And it's no trick-chain, either," he added. "It's a chain that will hold. You bet it will. I forged it myself, and I know. It's a chain you couldn't buy. Why? Because—because the iron of it's mixed with love. Nor can it be cut, nor filed, nor broken. I'm a smith, I am. And each link of it I tempered myself—with sweat and blood." [139]

There for a time it was a question—possibly a question in the mind of the duke himself—just how many minutes the smith still had to live. Many a valet had been executed for less. During a period of about thirty seconds the duke's face went black. Then the blackness dispersed. He slowly smiled.

After all, he wasn't to be cheated of his experiment.

But he answered the question that was in his own mind and the minds of all the others there as he looked at the smith and said:

"Fool, you'll be sufficiently punished—by your own device."

He let his eyes drift again to the Princess Gabrielle.

"And thou," he said, "art sufficiently punished already." [140]

III.

It happened to be a day of late spring; and as Gaspard and this strangely wedded bride of his and her parents came out of the castle, both fed and forgiven, it must have seemed to all of them that this was the most auspicious moment of their lives. The old folks, who had partaken freely of the generous wines pressed upon them, had now passed from their trembling terror to a spirit of frolic. Arm in arm, their sabots clogging, they did a rigadon down the winding road. It was a spirit of tender elation, though, that dominated Gaspard and Susette. They were like two beings distilled complete from the mild and fragrant air, the sweet mistiness of the verdant valley, the purpling solemnity of the Juras.

"What did he mean, his highness?" asked Susette as she pressed the smith's arm closer to her side. "What did he mean that you'd be punished by your own device?"

Gaspard looked down at her, pressed her manacled wrist to his lips, took thought.

"I don't know," he answered gently. "He must be crazy. It's like calling it punishment when a true believer receives the reward of paradise." [141]

"You love me so much as that?"

"*Pardi!*" he ejaculated. "And thou?"

"So much," she palpitated, "so much that when you looked at the princess like that—I wished you were blind!"

At the bottom of the hill, the old folks, Burgundians to the souls of them, happily bade the young couple to be off about their own affairs. They knew how it was with young married people. The old were obstacles—so they themselves well recalled—albeit that was more than twenty years ago.

Said Gaspard fondly: "This business has put me back in my work; but we'll call this a holiday. Shall we go to my cottage or into the forest? I know of a secret place—"

"Into the forest," whispered Susette. "I don't like the forge. It makes me think—think of that"

cursed princess—and of the work that almost lost you to me." Her blue eyes filmed as she looked up at him. "Oh, Gaspard, I also have dreamed so much—of love—a life of love with thee!"

There was no one there to see. Some day, perhaps, in the far distant future, this part of the world would be thickly populated. But this was not yet the case. Gaspard brought his bride close to his breast, smiled gravely into her upturned face. He kissed her tears away. Sweet Susette! She was such a child! How little she knew of life!

And yet what was that fragile, fluttering, elusive, tiny suggestion of a regret in the back of his brain? Now he saw it; now it was gone—a silver moth of a thought, yet one, some instinct warned him, was there to gnaw a hole in his happiness.

He said nothing about this to Susette, of course; he chased it from his own joy. And this joy was a beautiful, tumultuous thing.

"It's like the source of the Rhone, which I saw one time—this joy of ours," he said with placid rapture. "All sparkling it was, and wild cataracts, and deep places, clean and full of mystery."

"Ah, I want it to be always like this," said Susette.

Gaspard let himself go in clear-sighted thought. They were seated on a grassy shelf that overhung the great river. The forest hemmed them in on three sides like a wedding-bower fashioned to order; but here they could follow the Rhone for miles—with its drifting barges, its red-sailed shallops, its hamlets, and villages.

"Yes, ever like the Rhone," he said; "but growing, like the Rhone, until it's broad and majestic and strong to carry burdens—"

Susette interrupted him.

"Kiss me," she said. "Kiss me again. No—not like that; like you did a while ago."

And Gaspard, laughing, did as he was bidden. But what was that silver glint of something like a regret, something like a loss, that came fluttering once more across the atmosphere of his thought? Susette, though, kept him diverted. She was forever popping in upon his reflections with innocent, childish questions; and he found this infinitely amusing.

"Did you desire me—more than the princess?"

"Beloved, I have desired you for years."

"Did you think me more beautiful—than she?"

Again Gaspard laughed; but it set him to thinking. He liked to think. He thought at his forge, at his meals, nights when he happened to be awake.

"Love and beauty," he said, "these are created by desire. As a stone-cutter desires what is hidden in the rock, and hews it out and loves the thing he shapes, though it be as ugly as a gargoye, because of the desire that brought it forth—"

"Do you think that I'm a gargoye?" queried Susette hastily.

"Certainly not."

"Then, why did you call me one?"

So he had to console her again, and took a certain joy in it, although she protracted the dear, silly dispute by telling him that he had chained her to him simply so that he could torture her, and that he had wanted to spare the princess such suffering, and that therefore it was clear that he loved the princess more.

"Why, no," said Gaspard; "as for that, she's really in love with that young *Sieur de Mâcon*."

But thereupon Susette wanted to know how he came to be so well informed as to the contents of the lady's heart. So the smith gave over any attempt to reason, except in the silences of his brain; and just confined his outer activities to cooings and caresses, as Susette would have him do.

Yet his thought would persist.

That was the trail of a great truth he had almost stated back there, about the place held by desire in the origins of love and beauty. He had watched a certain Italian named Botticelli do a mural painting in the duke's private chapel. Lord, there was a passion! He had helped in the building of the cathedral at Sens. Lord, what fervor the builders put into their work! They were all like young lovers.

The smith sat up. It was almost as if he had cornered that glinting moth of doubt.

Yes, they had been like young lovers—*Sieur Botticelli*, in pursuit of the beautiful; the church-builders in pursuit of God. But—and here was the point—what if their desire had been satisfied? The quest would have stopped. The vision of the artist would have faded. The steeple would have fallen down. For desire would have ceased to exist.

"I'm hungry and I'm thirsty," said Susette.

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He kissed her pensively. They started home.

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IV.

"GASPARD! Gaspard!"

The smith sat up swiftly on his couch.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

All the same, in spite of certain disquieting dreams, it struck him as sweet and curious to be awakened like that by Susette. But he perceived that she was alarmed.

"Some one hammers at the door," she said.

Then he heard it himself, that thing he had already been hearing obscurely in his sleep.

"Coming!" he yelled. And he smilingly explained to Susette: "It's my old friend, Joseph, the carter. He'd bring his work to me if he had to travel five leagues." And he was for jumping up and running to the door.

"Wait," cried Susette. "I'll have to go with you, and I can't be seen like this."

"That's right," said Gaspard. "That confounded chain! I'd forgotten all about it." So he called out again to his friend, and the two of them held quite a conversation while Susette tried to make herself presentable. But Gaspard turned to her as she shook her hair out for the third time, starting to rearrange it. "Quick!" he urged. "He's in a hurry. One of his horses has cast a shoe."

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"You can't show yourself like that, either," cried Susette, playing for time.

"Me?" laughed Gaspard. "I'm a smith. I'd like to see a smith who couldn't show himself in singlet and apron!"

"You look like a brigand."

But he merely laughed: "Joseph won't mind."

And, indeed, Joseph the carter did appear to have but little thought for anything except the work in hand. For that matter, neither, apparently, did Gaspard. After the first few brief civilities and the inevitable jests about the chain, their attention was absorbed at once by the horses. There were four of these—Percherons, huge monsters with shaggy fetlocks and massive feet; yet Joseph and Gaspard went about lifting these colossal hoofs, and considering them as tenderly as if the two had been young mothers concerned with the feet of babes.

At last Susette let out a little cry, and both men turned to look at her.

"I faint," she said weakly.

And Gaspard sprang over and caught her in his arms. He was filled with pity. He was all gentleness.

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"Are you sick?" he asked.

"It was the odor of the horses," Susette replied in her small voice.

Joseph the carter seemed to take this as some aspersion on himself. "Those horses don't smell," he asserted stoutly.

But Gaspard signaled him to hold his place. "You'll be all right in a second or so," he told his wife. He spoke gently; although, as a matter of fact, he himself could find nothing about those magnificent animals to offend the most delicate sensibility. "You'll be all right. You can come into the forge and sit down while I shoe the big gray."

"That will be worse than ever," wailed Susette.

Joseph the carter was an outspoken man, gruff and honest.

"And there's a woman for you," he said, "to be not only wed but welded to a smith! *Nom d'un tonnerre!* Say, then, Gaspard, I'm in a hurry. Shall we start with the gray?"

"Yes," Gaspard answered softly, as he continued to support Susette.

"No, no, no!" cried Susette. "Not to-day! I'm too sick."

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"*Mais, chérie,*" Gaspard began.

"You love your work better than you do me," sobbed Susette.

"*Nom d'un pourceau!*" droned Joseph.

"But this work is important," Gaspard argued desperately. "The gray has not only cast a shoe, but the shoes on the others are loose. They've got to be attended to. It's work that will bring me in a whole *écu.*"

"I don't care," said Susette. "I can't stand the smell of those horses, and I could never, never bear the smell of the hot iron on their hoofs."

"But I'm a smith," argued Gaspard.

It was his ultimate appeal.

"I told you that you loved your work more than you did me," whimpered Susette, beginning to cry. "'*I'm a smith; I'm a smith*'—that's all you've talked about since you got me in your power."

Joseph the carter went away. He did so shaking his head, followed by his shining Percherons, which were as majestic as elephants, but as gentle as sheep. There was a tugging at Gaspard's heart as he saw them go. Such horses! And no one could shoe a horse as could he. He looked down at Susette's bowed head as she lay there cuddled in his arms. That despairing cry was again swelling in his chest: "But I'm a smith." He silenced it. He stroked the girl's head. [150]

As he did so, he was mindful as never before of the clink and jangle of the chain.

V.

"WHAT do you want me to do?" he asked that afternoon as they lay out in the shade of the poplars along the river bank.

"I want you to love me," she answered.

"I do love you. But we can't live on love—can we, Susette?—however pleasant that would be. I've got to work."

"Ah, your *sacré* work!"

"Still, you'll admit that you can't pick up *écus* in the road."

"You're thinking still of that miserable carter."

"No; but I'm thinking of his horses. Somebody's got to shoe them. You can't let them go lame—or be lamed by a bungler. I could have done that job as it should have been done." [151]

"But I tell you," declared Susette, pronouncing each word with an individual stress, "I can't support the grime and the odors and the racket of your forge. You ought to find some work that I do like. We could collect wild salads together—pick wild-flowers and sell them—something like that."

Gaspard sighed.

"But a man's work is his work," he averred.

"There you go again," said Susette, and the accusation was all the more damning in that it was spoken not in anger, but in grief. "Now that I've given myself to you—done all that you wished—you want to get rid of me; you want me to die."

"Haven't I told you a thousand times," cried Gaspard softly and passionately, "that I love you more than any man has ever loved any woman? Haven't I spent whole days and nights—yes, years—of my life desiring you? Haven't I proven it? Come into my arms, Susette. Ah, when I have you in my arms like this—"

"And it's only like this that I know happiness, my love," breathed the girl. "Yes; I'm jealous! Jealous of everything that can take you from me, body or spirit, if even for a moment. All women are like that. We live in jealousy. What's work? What's ambition, honor, duty, gold as compared with love?" [152]

But late that night Gaspard the smith roused himself softly from his couch. He lay there leaning on his elbow and stared out of the window of his cottage. Susette stirred at his side, undisturbed by the metallic clinking. Otherwise the night was one of engulfing, mystical silence.

Just outside the cottage the great river Rhone flowed placid and free in the light of the young moon. Up from the river-bottoms ran the vine-clad slopes of Burgundy as fragrant as gardens. There was no wind. It was all swoon and mystery.

"Lord God!" cried Gaspard the smith in his heart.

It was a prayer as much as anything—an inspiration that he couldn't get otherwise into words.

He was of that race of artist-craftsmen whose forged iron and fretted steel would continue to stir all lovers of beauty for centuries to come. [153]

"It's true," that inner voice of his spoke again, "that desire is the driving force of the world. 'Twas desire in the heart of God that led to creation. 'Tis so with us, His creatures—desire that makes us love and embellish. But when desire is satisfied, then desire is dead, and then—and then—"

And yet, as he lay there, buffeted by an emotion which he either would not or could not express, his eyes gradually focused on the castle of the great Duke of Burgundy up there on top of the hill—washed in moonlight, dim and vast; and it was as if he could see the Princess Gabrielle at her casement, kneeling there, communing with the night as he was doing.

Did she weep?

He had caught that message in her eyes as she had looked at him up there in the castle hall—had seen the same message before.

But never had she looked so beautiful—or as she looked now in retrospect—skin so white, mouth so tender, shape so stately, yet so slim and graceful. Oddly enough, thought of her now filled him with a vibrancy, with a longing.

And brave! Hadn't she shown herself to be brave though—to stand up like that there before her grandfather, him whom all Europe called Louis the Terrible, and declare herself ready to be welded to the man of her choice! She wouldn't faint in the presence of horses! And where couldn't a man go if led by a guardian angel like that? Slaves had become emperors; blacksmiths had forged armies, become the architects of cathedrals.

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His breathing went deep, then deeper yet. The sweat was on his brow. He sat up. He seized the chain in his powerful hands, made as if he were going to tear it asunder.

But after that moment of straining silence he again lifted his face.

"*Seigneur-Dieu*," he panted; "if—if I only had it to do over again!"

VI.

"It's Gaspard the smith," said the frightened page. "He craves the honor of an interview."

The duke looked up from his parchment.

"Gaspard the smith?"

The duke was seated before the fireplace in the hall. The forge had been removed; and instead there were some logs smoldering there, for the morning was cool. But his glance recalled the circumstances of his last encounter with the smith. The watchful page was quick to seize his cue.

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"He comes alone," the page announced.

The duke gave a start, then began to chuckle.

"*Tiens! Tiens!* He comes alone! 'Tis true, this is the time limit I set. Send the creature in."

And his highness continued to laugh all the time that the page was gone. But he laughed softly, for he was alone. Presently he heard a subdued clinking of steel. He greeted his subject with a sly smile.

Most subjects of Louis the Terrible would have been overjoyed to be received by their sovereign so graciously. But Gaspard the smith showed no special joy. He wasn't nearly so proud, either, as he had been that other time he had appeared before his lord. He bent his knee. He remained kneeling until the duke told him to get up. The duke was still smiling.

"So my three days were enough," said his highness.

"Enough and sufficient," quoth the smith.

Now that he was on his feet again he was once more the man. He and the duke looked at each other almost as equals.

[156]

"Tell me about it," said Louis.

"Well, I'll tell you," Gaspard began; "you see, I'm a smith."

"But incapable of forging a chain strong enough to hold a woman."

"I'm not so sure," Gaspard replied. "It was a good chain."

He put out his left wrist and examined it. The steel handcuff was still there. Up and back from it ran the chain which the smith had been carrying over his shoulder. He hauled the chain down. He displayed the other end of it, still ornamented by the companion bracelet.

"What happened? How did she get out of it?" queried the duke.

"She got thin," Gaspard responded with melancholy. "She didn't want me to work. She wanted the money that I could earn. Yes. She even wanted me to work. But it had to be her kind of work; something—something—how shall I say it?—something that wouldn't interfere with our love."

"And you didn't love her?"

"Sure I loved her," flared the smith. "Eh—*bon Dieu!* I wouldn't have coupled up with her if I hadn't loved her; but, also, I loved something else. I loved my work. I'm a smith. I'm a shoer of horses, a forger of iron, a worker in steel. I'm what the good God made me, and I've the good God's work to do!"

[157]

"So after a certain amount of honeymoon I had to get back to my forge. Joseph the carter, his Percherons; who could shoe them but me?"

"And she didn't like that?"

"No. When I made her sit in my forge she pined and whined and refused to eat. I was crazy. But I did my work. And this morning when I awoke I found that she had slipped away."

"You were already enchained," said his highness, "by your work."

The smith misunderstood.

"You can see it was no trick chain," he said, holding up the chain he himself had forged and playing with the links.

"Aye," said the duke, for he loved these philosophic disquisitions, when he was in the mood for them. "Aye, chains are the nature of the universe. The planets are chained. The immortal soul is chained to the mortal body. The body itself is chained to its lusts and frailties."

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"I'm a smith," said Gaspard, "and I want to work."

"We're not happy when we are chained," the duke continued to reflect aloud. "But I doubt that we'd be happier were our chains to disappear. No matter." He regarded Gaspard the smith with real benignancy. "At least you've proven the fatal quality of one particular chain—the thing I wanted to prove. And—you've saved the princess."

"'Twas of her I wanted to speak," Gaspard spoke up. "This is a good chain. I forged it myself."

"Yes, I know you're a smith," said the duke.

"Well, then," said Gaspard, "I've been thinking. Suppose—now that I've still got it on me—that we try it on the princess, after all." He noticed the duke's look of amazement. "I'm willing," said Gaspard. "I'm willing to have another try—"

"*Dieu de bon Dieu!*" quoth the duke. "Never content!" He recovered himself. He felt kindly toward the smith. "Haven't you heard?" he demanded. "The princess has forged a chain of her own. She eloped with that young Sieur de Mâcon the same day you declined to chain her to yourself."

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Transcriber's Note:

Spelling, punctuation and grammar have been retained except as follows:

Page 18	bear of leaves <i>changed to</i> bare of leaves
Page 36	enternal laws of logic <i>changed to</i> eternal laws of logic
Page 47	what has love to <i>changed to</i> what has love to do
Page 56	completely locked the hall <i>changed to</i> completely blocked the hall
Page 76	borne a thousand times <i>changed to</i> born a thousand times
Page 78	but the were frozen <i>changed to</i> but they were frozen
Page 85	Flourney studied a moment <i>changed to</i> Flournoy studied a moment
Page 86	"No!" Flourney snapped <i>changed to</i> <i>to</i> "No!" Flournoy snapped
Page 111	enlightened her igorance <i>changed to</i> <i>to</i> enlightened her ignorance
Page 116	I ain't no bayou <i>changed to</i> I ain't no bayou
Page 145	Its my old friend <i>changed to</i> It's my old friend

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