

The Real Man

By FRANCIS LYNDE

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CHAPTER XXIII.

—17—

The Flesh-Pots of Egypt.

Convinced by Verda Richlander's telephone message to the construction camp that he stood in no immediate danger, Smith spent the heel of the afternoon in the High Line offices, keeping in wire touch with Stillings, whom he had sent on a secret mission to Red Butte, and with Williams at the dam. The High Line enterprise was on the knees of the gods. If Williams could pull through in time, if the river-swelling storms should hold off, if Stanton should delay his final raid past the critical hour—and there was now good reason to hope that all of these contingencies were probable—the victory was practically won.

Smith closed his desk at six o'clock and went across to the hotel to dress for dinner. The day of suspense was practically at an end and disaster still held aloof; it was fairly outdistanced in the race, as it seemed. Williams' final report had been to the effect that the concrete-pouring was completed, and the long strain was off. Smith went to his rooms, and, as once before and for a similar reason, he laid his dress clothes out on the bed. He made sure that he would be required to dine with Verda Richlander, and he was stripping his coat when he heard a tap at the door and Jibbey came in.

"Glad rags, eh?" said the blase one, with a glance at the array on the bed. "I've just run up to tell you that you needn't. Verda's dining with the Stantons, and she wants me to keep you out of sight until after dark. By and by, when she's foot-loose, she wants to see you in the mezzanine. Isn't there some quiet little joint where we two can go for a bite? You know the town, and I don't."

Smith put his coat on, and together they circled the square to Frascati's, taking a table in the main cafe. While they were giving their dinner order, Starbuck came in and joined them, and Smith was glad. For reasons which he could scarcely have defined, he was relieved not to have to talk to Jibbey alone, and Starbuck played third hand admirably, taking kindly to the sham black sheep, and filling him up, in quiet, straight-faced humor, with many and most marvelous tales of the earlier frontier.

At the end of the meal, while Jibbey was still content to linger, listening open-mouthed to Starbuck's romances, Smith excused himself and returned to the hotel. He had scarcely chosen his lounging chair in a quiet corner of the mezzanine before Miss Richlander came to join him.

"It has been a long day, hasn't it?" she began evenly. "You have been busy with your dam, I suppose, but I—I have had nothing to do but to think, and that is something that I don't often allow myself to do. You have gone far since that night last May when you telephoned me that you would come up to the house later—and then broke your promise, Montague."

"In a way, I suppose I have," he admitted. "You have, indeed. You are a totally different man."

"In what way, particularly?"

"In every conceivable way. If one could believe in transmigration, one would say that you had changed souls with some old, hard-hitting, rough-riding ancestor. Have your ambitions changed, too?"

"I am not sure now that I had any ambitions in that other life."

"Oh, yes, you had," she went on smoothly. "In the 'other life,' as you call it, you would have been quite willing to marry a woman who could assure you a firm social standing and money enough to put you on a footing with other men of your capabilities. You wouldn't be willing to do that now, would you?—leaving the sentiment out as you used to leave it out then?"

"No, I hardly think I should."

Her laugh was musically low and sweet, and only mildly derisive.

"You are thinking that it is change of environment, wider horizons, and all that, which has changed you, Montague; but I know better. It is a woman, and, as you may remember, I have met her—twice." Then, with a faint glow of spiteful fire in the magnificent eyes: "How can you make yourself believe that she is pretty?"

He shrugged one shoulder in token of the utter uselessness of discussion in that direction.

"Sentiment?" he queried. "I think we needn't go into that, at this late day, Verda. It is a field that neither of us entered, or cared to enter, in the days that are gone. If I say that Corona Baldwin has—quite unconsciously on her part, I must ask you to believe—taught me what love means, that ought to be enough."

Again she was laughing softly.

"You seem to have broadly forgotten the old proverb about a woman scorned. What have you to expect from me after making such an admission as that?"

Smith pulled himself together and stood the argument firmly upon its unquestionable footing.

"Let us put all these indirections

aside and be for the moment merely a man and a woman, as God made us, Verda," he said soberly. "You know, and I know, that there was never any question of love involved in our relations past and gone. We might have married, but in that case neither of us would have got or exacted anything more than the conventional deceptions and amenities. We mustn't try to make believe at this late day. You had no illusions about me when I was Watrous Dunham's hired man; you haven't any illusions about me now."

"Perhaps not," was the calm rejoinder. "And yet today I have led to save you from those who are trying to crush you."

"I told you not to do that," he rejoined quickly.

"I know you did; and yet, when you went away this morning you knew perfectly well that I was going to do it if I should get the opportunity. Didn't you, Montague?"

He nodded slowly; common honesty demanded that much.

"Very well; you accepted the service, and I gave it freely. Mr. Kinzie believes now that you are another Smith—not the one who ran away from Lawrenceville last May. Tell me: would the other woman have done as much if the chance had fallen to her?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "I hope not," but he did not say it. Instead, he said: "But you don't really care, Verda; in the way you are trying to make me believe you do."

"Possibly not; possibly I am wholly selfish in the matter and am only looking for some loophole of escape."

"Escape? From whom?"

She looked away and shook her head. "From Watrous Dunham, let us say. You didn't suspect that, did you? It is so, nevertheless. My father desires it; and I suppose Watrous Dunham would like to have my money—you know I have something in my own right. Perhaps this may help to account for some other things—for your trouble, for one. You were in his way, you see. But never mind that: there are other matters to be considered now. Though Mr. Kinzie has been put off the track, Mr. Stanton hasn't. I have earned Mr. Stanton's ill-will because I wouldn't tell him about you, and this evening, at table, he took it out on me."

"In what way?"

"He gave me to understand, very plainly, that he had done something; that there was a sensation in prospect for all Brewster. He was so exultantly triumphant that it fairly frightened me. The fact that he wasn't afraid to show some part of his hand to me—knowing that I would be sure to tell you—makes me afraid that the trap has already been set for you."

"In other words, you think he has gone over Kinzie's head and has telegraphed to Lawrenceville?"

"Montague, I'm almost certain of it!"

Smith stood up and put his hands behind him.

"Which means that I have only a few hours, at the longest," he said quietly. And then: "There is a good bit to be done, turning over the business of the office, and all that; I've been putting it off from day to day, saying that there would be time enough to set my house in order after the trap had been sprung. Now I am like the man who puts off the making of his will until it is too late. Will you let me thank you very heartily and vanish?"

"What shall you do?" she asked.

"Set my house in order, as I say—as well as I can in the time that remains. There are others to be considered, you know."

"Oh; the plain-faced little ranch girl among them, I suppose?"

"No; thank God, she is out of it entirely—in the way you mean," he broke out fervently.

"You mean that you haven't spoken to her—yet?"

"Of course I haven't. Do you suppose I would ask any woman to marry me with the shadow of the penitentiary hanging over me?"

"But you are not really guilty."

"That doesn't make any difference; Watrous Dunham will see to it that I get what he has planned to give me."

She was tapping an impatient tattoo on the carpet with one shapely foot.

"Why don't you turn this new leaf of yours back and go home and fight it out with Watrous Dunham, once for all?" she suggested.

"I shall probably go, fast enough, when Macauley or one of his deputies gets here with the extradition papers," he returned. "But as to fighting Dunham, without money—"

She looked up quickly, and this time there was no mistaking the meaning of the glow in the magnificent brown eyes.

"Your friends have money, Montague—plenty of it. All you have to do is to say that you will defend yourself. I am not sure that Watrous Dunham couldn't be made to take your place in the prisoner's dock, or that you couldn't be put in his place in the

Lawrenceville Bank and Trust. You have captured Tucker Jibbey, and that means Tucker's father; and my father—well, when it comes to the worst, my father always does what I want him to. It's his one weakness."

For one little instant Smith felt the solid ground slipping from beneath his feet. Here was a way out, and his quick mentality was showing him that it was a perfectly feasible way. As Verda Richlander's husband and Josiah Richlander's son-in-law, he could fight Dunham and win. And the reward: once more he could take his place in the small Lawrenceville world, and settle down to the life of conventional good report and ease which he had once thought the acme of any reasonable man's aspirations. But at the half-yielding moment a word of Corona Baldwin's flashed into his brain and turned the scale: "It did happen in your case . . . giving you a chance to grow and expand, and to break with all the old traditions . . . and the break left you free to make of yourself what you should choose." It was the reincarnated Smith who met the look in the beautiful eyes and made answer.

"No," was the sober decision; and then he gave his reasons. "If I could do what you propose, I shouldn't be worth the powder it would take to drive a bullet through me, Verda, for now, you see, I know what love means. You say I have changed, and I have changed: I can imagine the past—and gone J. Montague jumping at the chance you are offering. But the mill will never grind with the water that is past: I'll take what is coming to me, and try to take it like a man. Good-night—and good-by." And he turned his back upon the temptation and went away.

Fifteen minutes later he was in his office in the Kinzie building, trying in vain to get Colonel Baldwin on the distance wire; trying also—and also in vain—to forget the recent clash and break with Verda Richlander. He was jiggling the switch of the desk phone for the twentieth time when a nervous step echoed in the corridor and the door opened to admit William Starbuck. There was red wrath in the mine owner's ordinarily cold eyes when he flung himself into a chair and eased the nausea of his soul in an outburst of picturesque profanity.

"The jig's up—definitely up, John," he was saying, when his speech became lucid enough to be understood. "We know now what Stanton's other

string was. A half hour ago, a deputy United States marshal, with a posse big enough to capture a town, took possession of the dam and stopped the work. He says it's a court order from Judge Lorching at Red Butte, based on the claims of that infernal paper railroad!"

Smith pushed the telephone aside. "But it's too late!" he protested. "The dam is completed; Williams phoned me before I went to dinner. All that remains to be done to save the charter is to shut the spillways and let the water back up so that it will flow into the main ditch!"

"Right there's where they've got us!" was the rasping reply. "They won't let Williams touch the spillway gates, and they're not going to let him touch them until after we have lost out on the time limit! Williams' man says they've put the seal of the court on the machinery and have posted armed guards everywhere. Wouldn't that make you run around in circles and yelp like a scalded dog?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A Strong Man Armed.

Smith put his elbows on the desk and propped his head in his hands. It was not the attitude of dejection; it was rather a trancelike rigor of concentration, with each and all of the newly emergent powers once more springing alive to answer the battle call. At the desk-end Starbuck sat with his hands locked over one knee, too disheartened to roll a cigarette, normal solace for all woundings less than mortal. After a minute or two Smith jerked himself around to face the news-bringer.

"Does Colonel Baldwin know?" he asked.

"Sure! That's the worst of it. Didn't I tell you? He drove out to the dam, reaching the works just ahead of the trouble. When M'Graw and the posse outfit showed up, the colonel got it into his head that the whole thing was merely another trick of Stanton's—a fake. Ginty, the quarry boss, brought the news to town. He says there was a bloody mix-up, and at the end of it the colonel and Williams were both under arrest for resisting the officers." Smith nodded thoughtfully. "Of

course; that was just what was needed. With the president and the chief of construction locked up, and the wheels blocked for the next twenty-four hours, our charter will be gone."

"This world and another, and then the fireworks," Starbuck threw in. "With the property all roped up in a law tangle, and those stock options of yours due to fall in, it looks as if a few prominent citizens of the Timanoni would have to take to the high grass and the tall timber. It sure does, John."

"Do you know, Billy, I have been expecting something of this kind—and expecting it to be a fake. That's why I sent Stillings to Red Butte; to keep watch of Judge Lorching's court. Stillings was to phone me if Lorching sued an order."

"And he hasn't phoned you?"

"No; but that doesn't prove anything. The order may have been issued, and Stillings may have tried to let us know. There are a good many ways in which a man's mouth may be stopped—when there are no scruples on the other side."

"Then you think there is no doubt that the court order is straight, and that this man M'Graw is really a deputy marshal and has the law for what he is doing?"

"In the absence of any proof to the contrary, we are obliged to believe it—or at least to accept it. But we're not dead yet. . . . Billy, it's running in my mind that we've got to go out there and clean up Mr. M'Graw and his crowd."

Starbuck threw up his hands and made a noise like a dry wagon wheel. "Holy smoke!—go up against the whole United States?" he gasped.

Smith's grin showed his strong, even teeth.

"Starbuck, you remember what I told you one night—the night I dragged you up to my rooms in the hotel and gave you a hint of the reason why I had no business to make love to Corona Baldwin?"

"Yep."

"Well, the time has come when I may as well fill out the blanks in the story for you." And with Billy looking straight into his eyes, he did so. At the end Starbuck was nodding soberly. "You sure have been carrying a back-load all these weeks, John, never knowing what minute was going to be the next. Now I know about this Miss Rich-pastures. She knows you and she could give you away if she wanted to. Has she done it, John?"

"No; but her father has. Stanton has got hold of the end of the thread, and, while I don't know it definitely, it is practically certain he sent a wire. If the Brewster police are not looking for me at this moment, they will be shortly. That brings us back to this High Line knockout. As the matter stands, I'm the one man in our outfit who has absolutely nothing to lose. I am an officer of the company, and no legal notice has been served upon me. Can you fill out the remainder of the order?"

"No, I'll be switched if I can!"

"Then I'll fill it for you. So far as I know—legally, you understand—this raid has never been authorized by the courts; at least, that is what I'm going to assume until the proper papers have been served on me. Therefore I am free to strike one final blow for the colonel and his friends, and I'm going to do it, if I can dodge the police long enough to get action."

Starbuck's tilting chair righted itself with a crash.

"You've thought it all out?—just how to go at it?"

"Every move; and everyone of them a straight bid for a second penitentiary sentence."

"All right," said the mine owner briefly. "Count me in."

"For information only," was the brusque reply. "You have a stake in the country and a good name to maintain. I have nothing. But you can tell me a few things. Are our workmen still on the ground?"

"Yes. Ginty said there were only a few stragglers who came to town with him. Most of the two shifts are staying on to get their pay—or until they find out that they aren't going to get it."

"And the colonel and Williams: the marshal is holding them out at the dam?"

"Uh-huh; locked up in the office shack, Ginty says."

"Good. I shan't need the colonel, but I shall need Williams. Now another question: you know Sheriff Harding fairly well, don't you? What sort of a man is he?"

"Square as a die, and as nervy as they make 'em. When he gets a warrant to serve, he'll bring in his man, dead or alive."

"That's all I'll ask of him. Now go and find me an auto, and then you can fade away and get ready to prove a good, stout alibi."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Candles Vs. Electricity.

The Society for Electrical Development, anxious to encourage a wider use of electricity for lighting, has prepared figures showing it is much cheaper than candles or kerosene.

A recent test of six candles showed that for 1 cent only 2.68 candle-power hours were obtained. If electricity for lighting costs 9 cents for a kilowatt hour a 20-watt lamp can be lighted for 50 hours for 9 cents. The efficiency of a 20-watt incandescent is a candle-power for 1.17 watts. Thus a 20-watt lamp will provide about 17 candle power. It will burn 50 hours for 9 cents, or 850 candle-power hours will cost 9 cents. One cent will buy 94.4 candle-power hours, or 35 times as much light as can be obtained from a candle for 1 cent.

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