

The Doom Trail

— By —
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 Author of PORTO BELLO GOLD, Etc.
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THE STORY

CHAPTER I—Harry Ormerod, proscribed traitor to King George, as a Stuart partisan, returning from France to London, rescues Alderman Robert Juggins from a band of assassins. Juggins proves to be the grandson of a former steward of Ormerod's father, to whom Juggins feels himself indebted. Ormerod tells Juggins he has abandoned the Stuart cause.

CHAPTER II—Juggins tells Ormerod of a Jacobite plot in the American colonies to weaken England by forwarding French interests. Their aim is the return of King James to the English throne. At its head is one Andrew Murray, a Scotsman, and a Frenchman, De Veulle, deadly enemy of Ormerod. The two are in London furthering their schemes. Ormerod sees them. Anticipating the plotters' early return to America, Juggins arranges for Ormerod to go there with letters to Governor Burnett, friend of Juggins, and work to foil Murray.

CHAPTER III—Disguised as Juggins' servant, Ormerod takes passage to America. He meets a Scottish girl, daughter of Murray, and ardent Jacobite, De Veulle recognizes him and their enmity flares. The Frenchman denounces Ormerod to the girl as a traitor to the Stuart cause. Believing him, she repulses Ormerod's proffer of friendship. He is thrown into the sea by an unseen assailant.

CHAPTER IV—Ormerod, regaining the deck, has recognized his assailant as Murray's servant, Tom, giant negro. He accuses Murray of employing the negro to assassinate him, but a truce is arranged. At New York Ormerod saves an Indian from insult. The Indian, who speaks English, is Ta-wan-ne-ars, Seneca chief.

CHAPTER V—Governor Burnett welcomes Ormerod as a friend of Juggins, and tells him Murray's aims. By what is known as the "Doom Trail" Murray smuggles furs, which should come to New York, to the French in Canada. With Ta-wan-ne-ars and a gigantic Dutchman, Peter Corlaer, Ormerod agrees to go to Niagara, French outpost, and spy out the secrets of the Doom Trail. He of course speaks French. De Veulle has won Ga-ha-no, Ta-wan-ne-ars' wife, now the Frenchman's mistress, and the red man seeks revenge. Ta-wan-ne-ars saves Ormerod's life in an attack on him by Murray's henchman, Bolling.

CHAPTER VI—Accusing Murray, without avail, of inciting Bolling, Ormerod learns the girl's name is Marjory. With his two companions he begins the journey.

CHAPTER VII—The three men wipe out a party of Cahnugas trailing them, evidently sent by Murray. At the Seneca village they are welcomed by Do-ne-ho-ga-weh, head chief, Ta-wan-ne-ars' uncle. Leaving Corlaer, Ta-wan-ne-ars and Ormerod take their way to Niagara.

CHAPTER VIII—At Niagara Ormerod, in the guise of Jean Courbois, forest ranger, learns the French plans from Joncaire, the commandant. De Veulle arrives, recognizes Ormerod, and he and Ta-wan-ne-ars are seized.

CHAPTER IX

La Vierge du Bois

A dash of water awakened me. One of the Cahnugas was leaning down, his hideous face close to mine, his fingers wrestling with the knots in the rawhide bonds.

"You cannot lie idle, my distinguished guest," called De Veulle from his place at the stern. "You must keep us dry."

As the rawhide strips were unwound I was able to sit up and look over the frail bark side. We were out of sight of land, and a moderate breeze was raising a slight swell, the crest of which occasionally broke over our bow. In the other canoe Ta-wan-ne-ars already was at work with a bark scoop.

All of that day we were isolated on the restless surface of the huge inland sea. Just before dusk of the second day we sighted a rocky coast, and sheered away from it. On the sixth day we passed out of the lake into the narrow channel of the great river, and landed in the evening at a palisaded post on the southern bank.

So far I had been treated fairly well. My captors had shared with me their meager fare of parched corn and jerked meat; and if I had been compelled to bale out the canoe incessantly, it was equally true that they had labored at the paddles night and day. But now everything was changed. My legs were left unbound, but with uncanny skill the savages lashed back my arms until well-nigh every bit of circulation was stopped in them and each movement I was forced to make became an act of torture. The one recompense for my sufferings was that for the first time since our capture I had the company of Ta-wan-ne-ars, and I was able to profit by his stoical demeanor in resisting the impulse to vent my anger against De Veulle.

"Say nothing, brother," he counseled me when I panted my hate, "for every word you say will afford him satisfaction."

"I wish I had staved in the canoe in the middle of the lake," I exclaimed bitterly. "What is this place? Where are we?"

Ta-wan-ne-ars looked around the landscape, rapidly dimming in the twilight.

"This place Ta-wan-ne-ars does not know," he replied. "Yet it is on the river St. Lawrence, for there is no other stream of this size. I think, brother, that De Veulle is taking us to La Vierge du Bois."

"It matters little where he takes us," I returned ill-naturedly. "Our end is like to be the same in any case. Joncaire told me all I sought to know of Jagara—but he told it to a dead man." "Not yet dead, brother," Ta-wan-ne-ars corrected me gently. "We have



still a long way to go—and we have our search."

"Which is like to lead us into the hands of—" I said rudely.

But De Veulle and three strange Frenchmen walked up at that moment, and Ta-wan-ne-ars was spared the necessity of an answer.

"Tis well," De Veulle was saying. "We will rest the night, then. I'll lodge my prisoners in the stockade."

"And there is naught else?" asked one of the others.

"The letter to Pere Hyacinthe—don't forget that."

Whereat they all laughed with a kind of sinister mystery and cast glances of amusement at us.

The Cahnugas drove us from the bank with kicks and blows of their paddle-blades, and the white men followed leisurely, laughing now and then as we dodged some particularly vicious attack upon our heads and faces. As it was, when we were flung into a bare log-walled room within the palisade we were covered with bruises. 'Twas the real beginning of our torment.

In the morning our arms were untied and we were given a mess of half-cooked Indian meal. Then the rawhides were rebound, and we set forth upon a trail that led from the river southeastward into the forest. A Cahnuga walked behind each of us, tomahawk in hand. De Veulle himself brought up the rear, his musket always ready. If we hesitated in our pace or staggered, the savage nearest to us used the flat of his tomahawk or his musket-butt.

On the third day, shortly after noon, I was astonished to hear faintly, but very distinctly, a bell ringing in the forest.

"La Vierge du Bois welcomes you," called De Veulle from behind us. "The bell rings you in. Ah, there will be bright eyes and flushed cheeks at sight of you!"

He laughed in a pleasant, melodious way.

"White cheeks to flush for you, Ormerod, and red cheeks to grow dusky for our friend the chief here! What a fluttering of hearts there will be!"

Could I have wrenched my hands free I would have snatched a tomahawk from the Cahnuga before me. But I did what Ta-wan-ne-ars did—held my head straight and walked as if I had not heard. Something told me the Seneca suffered as much as I.

We did not hear the bell again; but in mid-afternoon the forest ended upon the banks of a little river, and in the distance a wooden tower showed through the trees. As we drew nearer other buildings appeared, arranged in irregular fashion about a clearing. One of pretentious size stood by itself inside the palisade.

Cahnugas, including women and children, swarmed along the trail with guttural cries. A big, red-headed man stepped from a building which was evidently a storehouse. 'Twas Bolling, and with a yell of delight he snatched a block of wood from the ground and hurled it at my head.

"Curse me, 'tis the renegade and his red shadow!" he shouted. "We are in great luck! Do but wait until Tom knows you are here, my friend. The stake awaits you!"

He walked beside us, rubbing his hands together in high glee, and discoursing with seemingly expert knowledge on the precise character of the various kinds of torment we should undergo.

His attentions drew a considerable crowd; and so when we entered the single rude street of the settlement 'twas to find the whole population awaiting us. The gate in the stockade around the big house was open, and with a thrill I realized that a swirl of color there meant Marjory. Murray's stately figure I identified at a distance.

I think she did not know me at first. There was no reason why she should. My leather garments were rent and torn, my hair was tangled and matted with briars and thorns from the underbrush, my face was scratched and bleeding. I was thin and gaunt, and I might not walk upright, although I tried, for the rawhide things bowed by shoulders.

But Murray knew me instantly, and a flare of exultation lighted his face. De Veulle halted us directly in front of the gate.

"An old acquaintance has consented to visit us," he said.

And with a shock of grief I saw

comprehension dawn in Marjory's face. But she did not flush crimson as De Veulle had prophesied. She blanched white. I knew by that she had been long enough at La Vierge du Bois to appreciate the temper of its inhabitants.

"I seem to recollect the tall Indian beside our friend, likewise," observed Murray.

"Tis his companion of the interview at Cawston's in New York," rejoined De Veulle. "What, Mistress Marjory, you have not forgotten the rash youth who was always threatening or badgering us?"

Her lips moved mechanically, but 'twas a minute before she could force her voice to obey.

"I remember," she said.

Murray took snuff precisely and addressed himself to me.

"You are a dangerous youth, Master Ormerod. You had opportunity to win free of your past misdemeanors, you will allow, yet you would hear none of my advice. No, you must mix in affairs which did not concern you. And as I warned you, it hath been to your sore prejudice. Much as I—"

Marjory flung out her arms in a gesture of appeal.

"Why do you talk so much, sir?" she cried. "What have you in mind? This man is an Englishman! Is he to be given up to the savages?"

Murray surveyed her gravely.

"Tut, tut, my dear! Is this the way to conduct in public? 'Given up to the savages, forsooth! The young man is a traitor, a renegade—and a sorry fool into the bargain. He hath meddled in matters beyond his comprehension or ability. We must reckon up the harm he hath done, and assess his punishment in proportion.'"

"Just what do you mean by that, sir?" she demanded coldly.

"Frankly, my dear lass, I cannot tell you as yet."

"I think you mock me," she asserted.

"And I may tell you, sir, I will be party to no such crime to humanity. You talk of traitors. I am wondering if there is more than one meaning to the word."

She turned with a flutter of garments and sped into the house. De Veulle eyed Murray rather quizzically, but the arch-conspirator gave no evidence of uneasiness.

"You shall tell me about it," he said, "if nothing had happened. 'Mean-time I suppose they may be lodged with the Keepers.'"

"Yes," agreed De Veulle; "but I desire to give some particular instructions for their entertainment."

"Do so; do so, by all means," answered Murray equably. "But wait; here comes Pere Hyacinthe."

The Indians surrounding us huddled back, cringing against the stockade, their eyes glued upon a tall, thin figure in a threadbare black cassock of the Jesuit order. He walked with a peculiar halting gait. His face was emaciated, the skin stretched taut over prominent bones. His eyes blazed out of twin caverns.

Parts of his ears were gone, and as he drew nearer I saw that his face was criss-crossed by innumerable tiny scars. When he raised his hand in blessing the Indians I realized that two fingers were missing, and those which were left were twisted and gnarled as by fire.

"Whom have we here?" he called in a loud, harsh voice.

"Two prisoners, reverend sir," replied Murray. "English spies caught at Jagara by the vigilance of Monsieur de Veulle."

"Are they heretics?" demanded the priest.

"I fear I have never conversed with Master Ormerod concerning his religious beliefs," said Murray whimsically. The priest peered closely at me.

"Well, sir," he asked brusquely, "are you a son of the true faith?"

"Not the one you refer to, sir," I said.

"And this savage here?"

"He believes, quite devoutly, I should say, in the gods of his race."

The Jesuit locked and unlocked his fingers nervously.

"I fear, monsieur, that you will suffer torment at the hands of my poor children here," he said. "Will you not repent before it is too late?"

"But will you stand by and see your children torture an Englishman in time of peace?" I asked.

"Peace?" he rasped. "There is no peace—there can be no peace—between England, the harlot nation, and holy France. France follows her destiny, and her destiny is to rule America on behalf of the Church."

"Yet peace there is," I insisted.

"I refuse to admit it. We know no peace here. We are at war, endless war, physically, spiritually, mentally, with England. If you come amongst us, you do so at your bodily peril. But"—and the challenge left his voice and was replaced by a note of pleading, soft and compelling—"it may be monsieur, that in your bodily peril you have achieved the salvation of your soul. Repent, I urge you, and though your body perish your soul shall live."

Murray and De Veulle stirred restlessly during this harangue, but the savages were so silent you could hear the birds in the trees. I was interested in this man, in his fanatic sincerity, his queer conception of life.

"But if I repented, as you say," I suggested, "would not you save my body?"

His eyes burned with contempt.

"Would you drive a bargain with God?" he cried. "For shame! Some may tolerate that, but I never will! What matters your miserable body! It has transgressed the rights of France. Let it die! But your soul is immortal; save that, I conjure you! Death? What is death? And what matters the manner of death? Look at me, monsieur."

He fixed my gaze on each of his infirmities.

"Tut but the wreck of a man. These poor, ignorant children of the wilderness have worked their will with me, and because it was best for me God permitted it. Torture never hurt any man. It is excellent for the spirit. It will benefit you. If you must die—"

His voice trailed into nothingness. De Veulle interposed.

"Reverend father," he said, "I have a letter for you from Jacques Pourrier. The rivermen would like you to give them a mass Sunday. 'Tis a long—"

"Give me the letter," he cried eagerly. "Ah, that is good reading! Sometimes I despair for my sons—aye, more than for the miserable children of the wilderness. But now I know that a seed grows in the hearts of some that I have doubted. I shall go gladly."

De Veulle winked at Murray as the priest limped away.

"I must send Jacques a barrel of brandy for this," he remarked; "but our Cahnugas would be in the sulks if they could not celebrate the Moon feast, and they stand in such fear of the worthy Hyacinthe that they would never risk his wrath."

"The Moon feast!" exclaimed Murray. "True, I had forgotten. Well, 'twill be an excellent introduction to the customs of the savages for our friend the intruder."

"'Twill make a great impression upon him," laughed De Veulle. "In fact, upon both of them. I have a surprise for our friends to-morrow as well. The Mistress of the False Faces awaits them."

He murmured some orders to our guards, kicked me out of his path and sauntered through the gateway beside Murray.

With Bolling in active supervision and Tom hanging greedily on the flanks of the crowd, we were hustled through the clearing, past the chapel and an intervening belt of woodland, into a natural amphitheater on the far side of the village, where a back-ground of dark pines walled in a wide surface of hard-beaten, grassless ground. Two stakes stood ready, side by side, in the center, and our captors tore off our tattered clothes and lashed us to these with whoops of joy.

So we stood, naked and bound ankle, knee, thigh, chest and armpit, whilst the sun, setting behind the village, flooded the inferno with mellow light and an army of fiends, men, women and children, pranced around us. For myself, I was dazed and fearful, but Ta-wan-ne-ars again showed me the better road.

"The Keepers scream like women," he shouted, in order to make himself heard. "Have you never taken captives before? You are women. We scorn you. Do you know what has become of the seven warriors Murray sent to pursue us on the Great Trail?"

Silence prevailed.

"Yes, there were seven of them," gibed Ta-wan-ne-ars. "And there were three of us. And where are they? I will tell you, Cahnuga dogs. She's wendadie dogs, Huron dogs. Crawl clobber on your bellies while I tell you 'Their scalps hang in the lodge of Ta-wan-ne-ars—seven scalps of the Keepers who could not fight against real men. The scalps of seven who called themselves warriors and who were so rash that they tried to fight three.'"

A howl of anger answered him. "Begin the torment," yelled Bolling. Tom drew a wicked knife and ran toward us, his yellow eyes aflame. But a squat Cahnuga chief pushed him back.

"They are to be held for the Moon feast," he proclaimed. "See, the Mistress comes. Stand back, brothers."

The sound of a monotonous wailing filled the air, joining itself with the evening breeze that sighed in the branches of the pines behind us. The crowd of savages drew away from us in sudden awe.

"Ga-ga-sa Ho-nun-as-tase ta," they muttered to each other.

"What do they say?" I asked Ta-wan-ne-ars.

"The Mistress of the False Faces is coming," he replied curtly.

"And who is she?"

"The priestess of their devilish brotherhood."

Out from the long bark building wound a curious serpentine procession of men in fantastic head-masks, who danced along with a halting step. As they danced they sang in the weird monotone we had first heard. And behind them all walked slowly one without a mask, a young girl of upright figure, her long black hair cascading about her bare shoulders. Her arms were folded across her breast. She wore only the short ga-ka-ab, or kilt, with moccasins on her feet.

The breath whistled in Ta-wan-ne-ars' nostrils as his chest heaved against its bonds, and I turned my head in amazement. The expression on his face was compounded of such demonic ferocity as I had seen there once before—that, and incredulous affection.

"What is it?" he cried.

He did not heed me. He did not even hear me. His whole being was focused upon the girl whose ruddy bronze skin gleamed through the masses of her hair, whose shapely limbs ignored the beat of the music which governed the motions of her attendants.

(Continued Next Week.)

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