

The POOL of FLAME

by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLSWORTH YOUNG

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SYNOPSIS.

The story opens at Monte Carlo with Col. Terence O'Rourke, a military free lance and something of a gambler, in his hotel. Leaning on the balcony he sees a beautiful girl who suddenly enters the elevator and passes from sight.

CHAPTER II.

After that bitter disappointment his interest in his personal appearance dwindled to the negligible. In a black temper with himself (whom alone he blamed for the deception to which he had fallen too facile a victim) he searched blindly for a fresh tie, found it somehow, and knotted it round his collar in the most haphazard fashion imaginable. Then he shrugged a dress coat upon his shoulders and marched forth to dine.

In this humor he propelled himself with determination into the public restaurant of the establishment, and, oblivious to the allure of many pairs of bright eyes that brightened all too readily to challenge him, insisted upon a table all to himself, and dined in solitary grandeur, comporting himself openly as a morose and misunderstood person, and to his waiter with a manner so near rude that the latter began almost to respect him.

After some time he was disgusted to discover that he felt better. An impulse toward analysis led him to probe the psychology of the change, with the result that he laid the blame for it at the door—or the neck—of a half-bottle of excellent burgundy. So he ordered another, and, resolutely dismissing from his mind the woman who had no right whatever to be able to sing a certain song the way she had, set his wits to work on the riddle of Tomorrow.

To a man whose trade was fighting, the world just then was a most distressful place, too peaceful entirely.

Over his coffee the adventurer nodded in despair and frowned in disgust; then rousing, he summoned the waiter and paid his reckoning with a secret grin at himself, a fifty-franc note and a gesture which splendidly obliterated altogether every trace of suspicion that he intended to take back any part of the change due him.

Trimming and lighting a cigar, he reviewed the restaurant with a listless eye which discovered no one of his acquaintance; therefore, with neither haste nor waste of time, he rose and betook himself to the Casino—that is, to the one place where one may feel certain of encountering, sooner or later, everybody who is anybody within the bounds of the principality. This night, more particularly than on any preceding it, now that he had made up his mind to seek betterment of his fortunes elsewhere, he played heedlessly, little concerned with the fate of what money he had about him. He had set aside a reserve fund sufficient to settle his hotel bill and carry him a considerable distance into the unknown which he was resolved to bear, and was resigned to lose the remainder. It was a tenet of his creed of fatalism that chance seldom favored him: when he had money in his pockets; the tide of his affairs must be at its lowest ebb ere it turned. His policy then was obvious—childishly plain: he must fling to the winds all that which he had.

Now never was there a man who played to lose who didn't win his point. Colonel O'Rourke's case can be cited as no exception to this rule. Elbow to elbow on one side with an artless old lady from Terre Haute, who risked her minimums with the ferocious jealousy of a miser making an unsecured loan, on the other with an intent little Austrian gambler absorbed in the workings of his "system," the adventurer scattered gold upon the numbered and illuminated grid-iron as unconcernedly as though he had been matching shillings, and saw the coins gathered in by the greedy rakes as often as the little ivory ball ceased to chatter on the wheel.

For the better part of an hour this continued. And the little group of sycophants which had gathered behind his chair to watch his play insensibly dissipated. A whisper ran through the ranks of the habitués that the luck of the mad Irishman had turned; and forthwith he ceased to be an object of interest. Only the little Austrian, having risked the number of stakes prescribed by his system for one evening's play, put away his notebook and pencil and, surrendering his place to another, lingered behind O'Rourke's chair.

At length, inexpressibly bored and too impatient to defer the inevitable by niggardly wagers, O'Rourke ransacked his pockets and placed the proceeds—several hundred francs—I am as ignorant of the amount as he was indifferent to it—upon the red.

There fell a lull, the croupier holding the wheel to permit an unabated cub of Chicago millions to cover the

cloth with stakes too numerous for his half-developed intelligence to keep count of; and the adventurer shifted in his seat, reviewing the assemblage. For some moments, through the mysterious working of that sixth sense which men are pleased vaguely to denominate intuition, he had been subconsciously aware of being the object of some person's fixed regard, that somebody was not only watching, but weighing him. He sought the source of this sensation and, for a little time, sought it unsuccessfully. Annoyed, he persisted. He heard the croupier's mechanical "Rein ne va plus," followed by the whirring of the wheel, but cared so little that he would not turn to watch the outcome. Only an exclamation of the Austrian's appraised him of the fact that red had won. He glanced listlessly round to see the money doubled, and let it rest, turning back to his survey of the throng. A moment later his attention became fixed upon two men who stood in the doorway, looking toward him. Again the wheel buzzed, the ball clattered and was still. The word rouge among others in the announcement told him that again he had won; this time, however, he did not turn, but, frowning in speculation, stared back at the two.

Stared? Indeed and he did just that. If it was impertinent, sure and were they not staring at him? And who should galsay an O'Rourke the right to stare at anybody, he being king or commoner? Furthermore, who might these men be, and what their interest in himself?

The one was tall and slender, saturnine; an elegant, owing as much to the art of his tailor and upholsterer as to his own indisputable, native distinction; a Frenchman—at least of a type unquestionably Gallic. His face was very pale, his fine, pointed moustache very precise, jaw square, forehead high, eyes deep and dark beneath brows heavy, level and black, manner marked by a repose almost threatening in its impassibility.

His companion was shorter of stature, a younger man by at least ten years, rather stout and very nervous, with a fresh red face marred by hallmarks of dissipation; British, every inch of him.

"That, I'm thinking," mused O'Rourke, "will be the Honorable Bertie Glynn. Faith, he looks the part, at least; 'tis just that kind—bred, underbred, without brains or real stamina—that would run through a half-million sterling inside a year."

But the other?

"Monsieur," the little Austrian stammered excitedly in his ear, "for you the red had doubled a fourth time."

"Thank ye," replied O'Rourke without moving. "Twill turn up seven, this run."

The system-gambler subsided, petrified.

But the other? O'Rourke continued to probe his memory. Something in the man's personality was curiously reminiscent. . . . Of a sudden he remembered. The Frenchman had been pointed out to him, years ago, in Paris, as a principal in a Boulevard scandal which had terminated in a duel—a real duel, in which he had been victorious. He was accustomed to anticipate such an outcome of his affair of honor, however; that was why he had been named to O'Rourke; Des Trebes; (that was the name; the Viscomte des Trebes) was a duelist of international disrepute.

"Monsieur," the agitated voice fluttered in his ear, "you have won yet again—for the sixth time!"

"Let it stand for the seventh, mon ami."

Why should Des Trebes be watching him so openly, so pointedly? As he watched he became aware that these two, the Frenchman and the Englishman, were not alone; detached though their attitude was, they were evidently of a party of ladies and gentlemen whose gay, chattering group formed their background.

"Monsieur, the seventh turn!"

"Yes, yes."

"Rein ne va plus," croaked the croupier.

One of the ladies turned to speak to the Honorable Mr. Glynn. Smiling, he nodded, and offered her an arm. She lingered, addressing Des Trebes. The latter bowed, lifted his shoulders and laughed lightly, plainly excusing himself. A general movement took place in the party; it began to disintegrate, men and women pairing off, all moving at leisure toward the lobby. Des Trebes alone remained. O'Rourke could see that the personnel of the gathering was largely British. He recognized Lady Plinlimmon, whose yacht (he had heard casually) had arrived in the harbor that morning. Evidently this was her party. Another woman's figure caught his attention; her back was turned, but she had an air, a graceful set of the shoulders, an

individual pride and spirit in the pose of her head, that O'Rourke could have sworn he knew. He was conscious that he flushed suddenly, that his heart was pounding. He made as if to rise and follow, but was prevented, almost forced back by a hand which the Austrian in his feverish interest had unconsciously placed on the Irishman's shoulder.

"Monsieur, monsieur!" he gasped, his eyes, protruding, fixed upon the wheel. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He trembled as though his own fortunes hung on the chance. Impressed, O'Rourke could not forbear to linger, to cast a reluctant glance at the table.

The size of his pile of gold and notes on the red was a somewhat startling sight to him: His breath stopped in his throat. The ivory sphere was rattling over the compartments to its predestined place. What if he were to win? O'Rourke began to calculate mentally how much he had at stake, how much he might win if his careless prediction that red would turn up the seventh time should come true—lost his bearings in a maze of intricate computation and was on the point of abandoning the problem when black was called.

"Great God!" panted the Austrian, withdrawing his hand.

O'Rourke rose. "The fortunes of war, me friend," said he with a laugh so unforced that it sounded unnatural. He strode away hastily, searching the throng in the lobby for her with whom his mind was occupied to the exclusion of all else.

The system-gambler followed him, with a stare of incredulous amazement. "What a man!" said he to himself, if half aloud. A second later he added: "What admirable acting!"

But he was mistaken. There was nothing assumed in O'Rourke's air of apathy. He was actually quite indifferent and already preoccupied with his new interest—the pursuit of the woman whose unexpected appearance in Monte Carlo seemed likely to upset all his calculations. The sails of the barque of his fortunes had all his life long been trimmed to the winds of Chance; he was accustomed to seeing them fall flat and flapping, empty, just when a venture seemed most propitious. The loss of the money was nothing; the initial amount had been little enough in all conscience, though the major part of all that he possessed; but to him the woman was everything—the world and all.

And now she was gone, had disappeared with her companions! In that instant in which he had turned from her to the table, she had made her escape.

He cursed roundly the weakness that had lost her to him, and passing rapidly through the lobby, left the Casino, pausing before the entrance to look right and left.

There was no sign of what he sought; the party had vanished. And who should say whither?

"Damnation!" he grumbled.

"Monsieur," a voice intruded at his side.

"He turned with a start, annoyed. 'Well?' he demanded curtly, recognizing Des Trebes.

The Frenchman bowed. "I have the honor to address Monsieur le Colonel O'Rourke?"

Reflecting that the man might afford him the information he sought, O'Rourke unheeded. "I am he, Monsieur des Trebes."

Surprised, the latter lifted his eyebrows, showing even white teeth in a deprecatory smile. "You know me, monsieur?"

"By sight and reputation only, monsieur."

"I am honored."

"No more than myself, if it comes to that."

"I am that."

"I feared so. But it was essential that we should speak in privacy."

"Yes—"

"But before I proceed, may I put you a question or two bordering, perhaps, upon impertinence, yet not so conceived?"

"What a long-winded beggar!" O'Rourke commented mentally. "As for that," said he aloud, "tis impossible for me to calculate the impertinence until 'tis put to me. Eh?"

"Believe me, sir, I am anxious only to avoid indiscretion. It is the question of your identity alone. I desire only to be assured that you are the Colonel O'Rourke I take you to be."

"My faith! And who else would I be, now?"

"There's the bare possibility that two of the same name might exist."

"Tis so bare that 'tis fairly indre-"

"chuckled the Irishman. "But fire away."

"I am not mistaken in assuming that I address the Colonel Terence O'Rourke who was at one time a party to le petit Lemercler's mad Empire du

yesterday. Our meeting with Madame Smyth-Herriott was quite accidental."

"Oh, the devil!" said O'Rourke beneath his breath. Plainly he might expect nothing more helpful from this man; he had jumped prematurely at a baseless conclusion, it seemed. And by now it was much too late to think of further pursuit. "That is all I wished to know, monsieur," he admitted lamely. "There was a lady in the group whom I thought I recognized. I wished to find her, and fancied ye might perhaps direct me. Ye didn't by any chance happen to hear Mrs. Smyth-Herriott say where she was going with Mr. Glynn?"

"Unhappily, no, monsieur."

"Very well then. What can I have the happiness to serve ye in?"

The Frenchman hesitated briefly. "This is a trifle public," he suggested. "Will you not be kind enough to walk with me a little distance, while we converse?"

"Gladly, monsieur."

Des Trebes produced a cigarette case, and, together, smoking, the two turned their backs upon the casino and wandered off along the paths of the terraced gardens. Ever descending, they came at length to the secluded, little lighted and less frequented portions of the grounds which border the waterfront, and presently sat side by side upon a bench, looking out over the harbor. Then and then only did Des Trebes approach his subject—something which he had until now studiously avoided, distracting the not over-patient Irishman by a falling fire of banalities.

"I dare say, Colonel O'Rourke," he

Sahara project and who later married Lemercler's widow, Madame la Princesse de Grandlieu?"

O'Rourke took a long breath and looked his questioner up and down. "Ye have a very pretty taste in the matters of Impertinences," he said gravely. "However, let that pass. I'm the same man."

"A thousand pardons. Caution in matters such as this— A shrug complete! the thought most eloquently. "You can give me proofs of your identity, then?"

"Proofs!" O'Rourke got to his feet. "Believe me, monsieur, ye have all the proof I'm willing to give ye, and that's my last word. If ye find it insufficient, why, then—"

"Pardon!" Des Trebes interrupted, rising. "I am myself more than content. But the Government of France—"

"The Government of France—!"

O'Rourke whistled.

"Is more exacting than I. It knows a certain Colonel O'Rourke and him alone does it need."

"The devil it does! And what will it be wanting with me?"

"I can say at present no more than that I represent Government in an affair demanding secrecy and dispatch. I have a certain diplomatic mission to discharge, and shall have need, monsieur, of a man strong, bold, venturesome, willing to undertake a long and perhaps perilous journey." Had Des Trebes been inspired he could have formulated no speech better calculated to intrigue the Irishman; the mere echo of its import would have fired his hearer's fancy. He added: "And I am authorized to retain for that purpose, should I be fortunate enough to find him unengaged, a certain Colonel Terence O'Rourke."

"Say no more, monsieur. 'Tis enough. 'Secrecy—dispatch—a long and perilous journey!' Faith I'm just your man!"

"You have no other business of the moment?"

"None whatever."

"Then I am indeed fortunate. And now, I presume, you will no longer object to satisfying me as to your identity."

"Not in the least. Although, to be candid, monsieur, I'm not in the habit of carrying me Bertillon record about me. But if ye'll have the goodness to accompany me to the Orient, over there, I'll put your mind at ease before ye can say knife."

Des Trebes nodded. "I should be delighted, but unfortunately—"

He snapped the case of his watch—"I have an appointment with a confrere. May we fix a time—in half an hour,



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Trouble. That man seems to be greatly depressed about something.

Yes. He must live in some town whose baseball team is at the tail-end.

Safer Plan. I let my house furnished, and they've had measles there. Of course, we've had the place disinfected, so I suppose it's quite safe. What do you think?

I fancy it would be all right, dear; but I think perhaps it would be safer to lend it to a friend first.—Punch.

Calculation. Going to make garden? I dunno," replied the man who always looks discouraged. "I'm busy now figuring up how many tons of lettuce I'll have to raise to pay for the spade and the rake and the rest of the outfit."

Oh, Learned Judge. A California judge decided that there is no judicial authority to keep a man from making love to his wife, although it could stop his beating her.

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(TO BE CONTINUED.)



"I Have the Honor to Address Monsieur Le Colonel O'Rourke."

suggested abandoning his mother tongue for excellent English—"I dare say you are wondering—"

"I am that."

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