



# The POOL of FLAME

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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. At the gaming table O'Rourke notices two men watching him. One is the Hon. Bertie Glynn, while his companion is Viscount Des Trebes, a duelist. The viscount tells him the French government has directed him to O'Rourke as a man who would undertake a secret mission.

## CHAPTER III.

As he stepped out of the lift Colonel O'Rourke remarked a light in his room, visible through the transom over the door.

"The femme de chambre," he thought. "Sure and the poor thing's still busy trying to clear up. . . ."

To the contrary, he found the door fast. "Tis careless she was to leave the light on," he observed, fitting his key in the lock.

If thoughtless in that one way, the woman had fulfilled the letter of her word in the other. It was with comprehensive relief (since he anticipated a caller) that he found the room once again presentable.

But one thing surprised him; and more surprising still was the fact that his ordinarily indifferent eye should have detected it at the first glance. He had indeed hardly entered before he became aware of a square of white paper tucked in the corner of the bureau mirror.

"The divile, now!" he greeted it. "That's curious. . . . Could one of me many admirers have bribed the femme de chambre to bring a note to me?" He chuckled, holding to the light a much soiled envelope, grimy with the marks of many fingers, plastered with stamps and substitute addresses, having evidently been forwarded over half the world before it reached the addressee; who was, in a bold hand, "Colonel Terence O'Rourke."

He whistled low over this, examining it intently, infinitely less concerned with its contents than with the manner by which it had reached him. The first postmark seemed to be that of Raanong, the original address, the Cercle Militaire, his club in Paris. Thence, apparently, it had sought him in Galway, Ireland, Dublin, Paris again, and finally—after half a dozen other addresses—"C. of Mme. O'Rourke, Hotel Carlton, London." The London postmark was indecipherable.

He found himself trembling violently. By one hand alone could this have reached him, since the post had not brought it to Monte Carlo. He recalled that woman's voice which had so stirred him, the woman of the Casino whose bearing had seemed to him so familiar.

Some one tapped on the door; he smothered a curse of annoyance, and went to answer, thrusting the letter into his pocket.

A page announced Monsieur le Comte des Trebes.

"Show the gentleman up," snapped O'Rourke. He was about to add, "in five minutes," when Des Trebes himself appeared.

"Anticipating that message, monsieur," he said, moving into view from one side of the door, "I took the liberty of accompanying this boy. I am late, I fear."

O'Rourke forced a nod and smile of welcome. "Not to my knowledge," said he.

The Frenchman consulted his watch. "Ten minutes late, monsieur; it is ten past midnight."

"Then," said O'Rourke, "the top of the morning to ye. Enter, monsieur." He stood aside, closing the door behind his guest. "Tis no matter; if I thought ye punctual, 'tis so ye are to all intents and purposes."

A chair, monsieur." He established Des Trebes by a window. "And a cigarette? . . . A drop to drink? . . . As ye will. . . . And since 'tis to talk secret business that we're here—would ye like the door locked?"

"That is hardly essential!" Des Trebes reviewed his surroundings with swift, searching glance. "We are at least secure from interruption; one could ask little more."

"True for ye," laughed O'Rourke. He moved toward the alcove. "Now first of all I'm to submit proofs of me identity, I believe," he added, intending to dig out of his trunk a dispatch-box containing his passports and other papers of a private nature.

But Des Trebes had changed his mind. "That is unnecessary, monsieur. Your very willingness is sufficient proof. I have your word and am content."

"That's the way of doing business that I like," assented O'Rourke heartily, warming a little to the man as he turned back a chair facing the vi-

comte. "Besides, I quarrel with no man's right to be reasonable. . . . And now I'm at your service, monsieur."

Des Trebes, lounging back, knees crossed, thin white fingers interlaced, black eyes narrowing, regarded the Irishman thoughtfully for a moment. Abruptly he sat up and removed from an inner pocket a long thin white envelope, thrice sealed with red wax and innocent of any super-scription whatever.

"Are you prepared, monsieur," he demanded incisively, "to play blind-man's buff?"

"Am I what?" asked O'Rourke, startled. Then he smiled. "Pardon; perhaps I fail to follow ye."

"I mean," explained the vicomte patiently, "that I have to offer you a commission to act under sealed orders"—he tapped the envelope—"the orders contained hereto."

"And when would I be free to open that?"

"As soon as you are at sea—away from France, monsieur."

O'Rourke considered the envelope doubtfully. "From you, monsieur—from the Government of France, which you represent," he said at length, "yes; I will accept such a commission. France," he averred simply, "knows me; it wouldn't be asking me to do anything a gentleman shouldn't."

"You may feel assured of that," agreed Des Trebes gravely. "Indeed, I venture to assert you will find this—let us say—adventure much to your liking. . . . Then you accept?"

"One moment—a dozen questions, by your leave. . . . When must I start?"

"Tomorrow morning by the Cote d'Azur Rapide, at ten minutes to eight."

"And where will I be going?"

"First to Paris; thence to Havre; thence, by the first available steamer, to New York; finally, it may be to Venezuela, monsieur."

"Expenses?"

"I will myself furnish you with funds sufficient to finance you as far as New York. There our consul-general will provide you with what more you may require. It is essential that your connection with this affair shall be kept secret; should you draw on the government in this country, it would expose you to grave suspicions, perhaps to danger."

"I understand that," assented the Irishman. "But to obviate all danger of mistake, would it not be well to have one of your trusted agents meet me on the steamer and provide me with whatever ye figure I might require? 'Tis barely possible your consul-general might not recognize me in New York. Why should he? I never heard his name, even."

Des Trebes meditated this briefly. "It shall be as you desire, monsieur. It shall be arranged as you suggest."

"Finally, then, what is to be my recompense?"

"That must depend. I am authorized to assure you that in no case will you receive less than twenty-five thousand francs; in event of a successful termination of your mission, the reward will be doubled."

"Tis enough," said O'Rourke with a sigh; "I accept."

The Frenchman rose, offering him the envelope. "You must pledge yourself, monsieur, not to break these seals until you are at sea?"

"Absolutely—of course." O'Rourke took the packet, weighed it curiously in his hand and scrutinized the seals.

He remarked that they were yet soft and fresh; the wax had been hot within the half hour.

"I will do myself the honor of meeting you at the train to see you off, monsieur," said Des Trebes. "At that time, also, will I provide you with the funds you require."

"Thank ye."

Their hands met.

"Good night, Monsieur O'Rourke."

"Good night."

Half way to the door, Des Trebes paused. "Oh, by the way," he exclaimed carelessly, "I believe you are a friend of my old school-fellow, Chamberlain—non cher Adolph?"

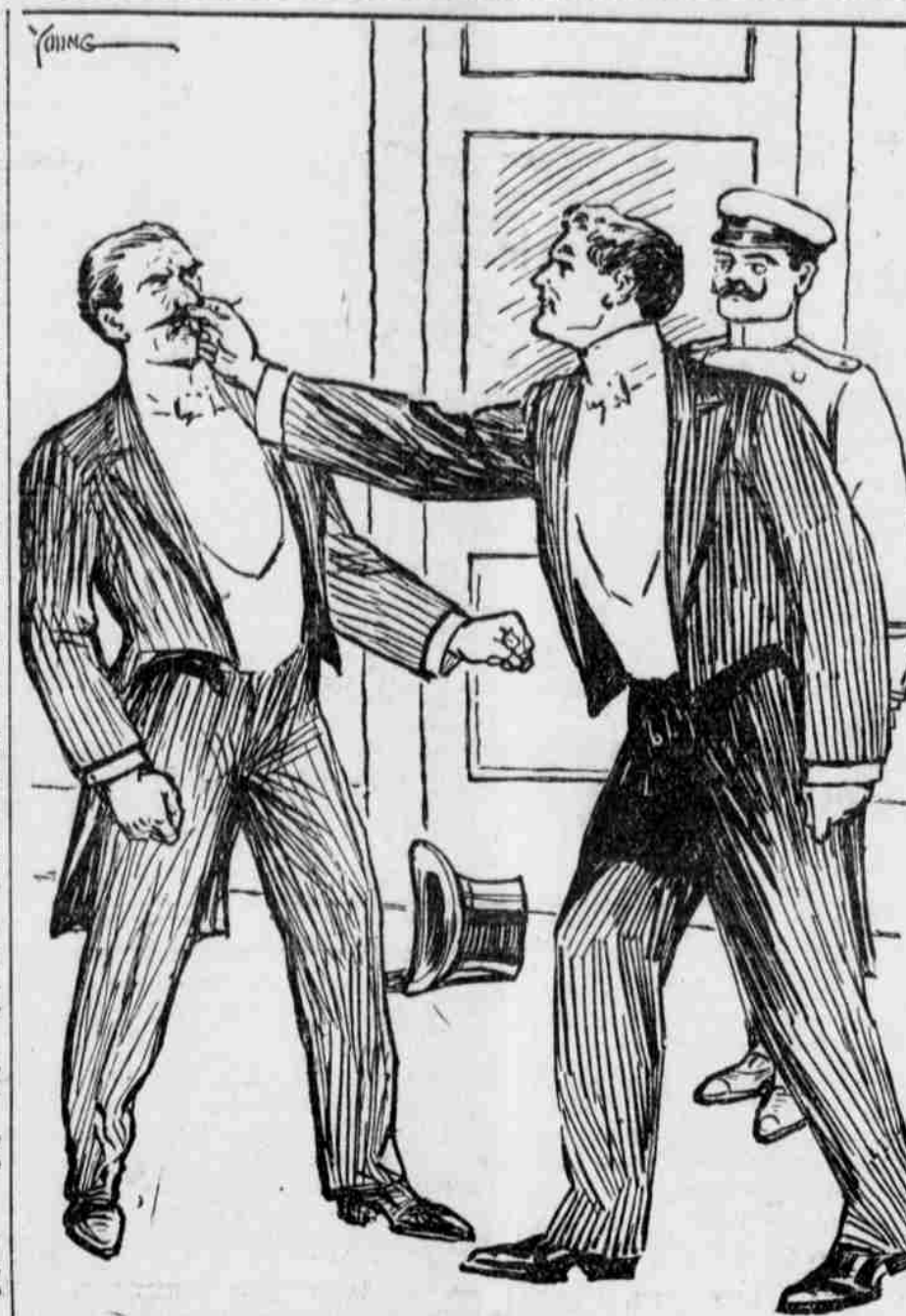
"Tis so," assented the Irishman warmly. "The best of men—Chamberlain!"

"Odd," commented the vicomte; "only this afternoon I was thinking of him, wondering what had become of the man."

"The last I heard of him, he was in Algeria, monsieur—with some French force in the desert."

"Thank you. . . . On the point of leaving the vicomte snuffed his teeth on a second "Good night," and awoke beneath his breath.

O'Rourke, surprised, stared. The Frenchman was standing stiffly at attention, as if alarmed. His pallor was, if possible, increased, livid—his closely shaven beard showing blue-black on his heavy jaws and prominent chin.



"Monsieur, Your Nose Annoys Me!"

His eyes blazed, shifting from the alcove to O'Rourke.

"Monsieur?" he demanded harshly, "what does this insult mean?"

"Mean?" iterated O'Rourke. "Insult? Faith, ye have me there."

Speechless with rage, Des Trebes gestured violently toward the alcove; and O'Rourke became aware that the curtains were shaking—waving as though a draught stirred them. But there was no draught. And beneath their edge he saw two feet—two small, bewitching feet in the daintiest and most absurd of evening slippers, with an inch or so of silken stockings showing above each.

Des Trebes' eyes, filled with an expression unspeakably offensive, met the Irishman's blank, wondering gaze. "It is, no doubt," the Frenchman stammered, "sanctioned by your code to have me spied upon by the partner of your liaisons."

"But, monsieur—"

"I compliment the lady upon the smallness of her feet, as well as upon ankles so charming that I cannot bring myself to leave without a glimpse of their mistress' features."

Des Trebes moved toward the alcove. Thunderstruck, O'Rourke rapped out a stupefied oath, then in a stride forestalled the man. With him it was as if suddenly a circuit had closed in his intelligence, establishing a definite connection between the three—now four—most mystifying incidents of the evening.

"Less haste, monsieur," he counseled in a voice of ice. His hand fell with almost paralyzing force upon the other's wrist as he sought to grasp the curtain, and swung him roughly back. "Yourself will never know who's there—whenever the lady may be. . . . Ah, but no, monsieur!"

Maddened beyond prudence, Des Trebes had struck at his face. O'Rourke warded off the blow and in what seemed the same movement whirled the man round by his captive wrist and caught the other arm from the back. The briefest of struggles ensued. The Frenchman, taken at a complete disadvantage, was for all his resistance hustled to the door and thrown through it before he fairly comprehended what was happening.

Free at length, if on all fours, he scrambled to his feet to find O'Rourke had shut the door behind him, calmly awaiting the next move.

"Haven't ye had enough?" demanded the Irishman as the vicomte, blinded with passion, seemed about to renew the attack. "Or are ye wishful to be going downstairs in the same fashion?"

Des Trebes drew back, snarling, "You dog!" he cried. Then abruptly, by an admirable effort, he calmed himself surprisingly, drawing himself up with considerable dignity and throttling his temper as he quietly adjusted the disorder of his clothing. Only in his eyes, black as sloes and small,

did there remain any trace of his malignant and unquenchable hatred.

"I am unfortunately," he sneered, "incapable of participating in such brawls as you prefer, Colonel O'Rourke. But I am not content. I warn you. . . . My rank prevents me from punishing you personally; I am obliged to fight gentlemen only."

O'Rourke laughed openly.

"But I advise you to leave Monte Carlo before morning. Should you remain, or should you come within my neighborhood another time—at whatever time—I will kill you as I would a rabid cur—or cause you to be shot."

"There's always the coward's alternative," returned the Irishman. "But ye mustn't forget ye've only the one leg to stand upon in society—your notoriety as a duelist. And I shall take steps to see that ye fight me before sunset. Else shall all Europe know ye for a coward."

Behind the vicomte the lift shot up, paused, and discharged a single passenger. As swiftly the cage disappeared.

Out of the corner of his eye, O'Rourke recognized the newcomer as an old acquaintance, and his heart swelled with gratitude while a smile of rare pleasure shaped itself upon his lips. He had now the Frenchman absolutely at his mercy.

"Captain von Einem," he said quickly, "by your leave, a moment of your time."

The man paused stiffly, with the square-set and erect poise of an officer of the German army. "At your service, Colonel O'Rourke," he said in impeccable French.

But the Irishman had returned undivided attention to Des Trebes. "Monsieur," he announced, "your nose annoys me." And with that he shot out a hand and seized the offensive member between a strong and capable thumb and forefinger. "It has annoyed me," he explained in parenthesis, "ever since I first clapped me two eyes upon ye, scum of the earth that ye are."

And he tweaked the nose of Monsieur le Viscomte des Trebes, tweaked it with a will and great pleasure, tweaked it for glory and the Saints; carefully, methodically, even painstakingly, he kneaded and pulled and twisted it from side to side, ere releasing it.

Then stepping back and wiping his fingers upon a handkerchief, he cocked his head to one side and admired the result of his handiwork. "Tis an amazingly happy effect," he observed critically—"the crimson blotch it makes against the chalky complexion ye affect, Monsieur des Trebes. . . ."

And now I fancy ye'll fight. Your friends may call upon mine here—Captain von Einem, with your permission."

"Most happy, Colonel O'Rourke," assented the German, blue eyes sparkling

in an immobile countenance. "I shall wait the seconds of Monsieur des Trebes in my rooms."

The Frenchman essayed to speak choked with passion, and turning abruptly, somewhat unsteadily descending the staircase.

O'Rourke laughed briefly, offering the German his hand. "Twas wonderfully opportune, your appearance, captain dear," said he. "Thank ye from the bottom of me heart. . . . And now will ye forgive me excusing myself until I hear from ye about the affair of the morning? I've a friend waiting in me room here. . . . Pardon the rudeness."

## CHAPTER IV.

It would be difficult to designate precisely just what O'Rourke thought to discover, when after a punctilious return of Captain von Einem's salute, he reopened his door and, closing it quickly as he entered, turned the key in the lock.

His mood was exalted, his imagination excited; the swift succession of events which had made memorable the night, culminating with his open invitation to a challenge from the most desperate duelist in Europe, had inspired a volatile vivacity such as not even the excitement of the Casino had been potent to create in him. Of all mad conjectures imaginable the maddest was too weird for him to credit in his humor of that hour. Eliminating all else that had happened, in the course of that short evening, his heart had been stirred, his emotions played upon by a recrudescence of a passion which he had striven with all his strength to put behind him for a time; he had first heard the voice of the one woman to whom his love and faith and honor were irretrievably pledged, he had then seen her (or another who remarkably resembled her) for the scantiest of instants; and finally he had mysteriously received a letter which could, he believed, have been conveyed to him by no other hand but hers. And now he was persuaded beyond a doubt that the person of the alcove, the eavesdropper for whose fair repute he had chosen to risk his life, was nobody in the world but that same one woman.

But more than all else, perhaps, he expected and feared to find the room deserted; for the balcony outside the windows afforded a means of escape too facile to be neglected by one who wished not to be discovered. . . .

His first definite impression was of consternation and despair; for the lights had been shut off in his absence. Then quickly he discerned, with eyes dazzled by the change from the lighted hallway to the lightless chamber, the shadowy shape of a woman, motionless between him and the windows, waiting. . . .

An electric switch was at his elbow. With a single motion he could have drenched the place with light. For an instant tempted, some strange scruple of delicacy, abetted it may be by his native love of romantic mystery, stayed his hand.

"Madame," said he, "or mademoiselle, whichever ye may be—the windows are open, myself not detaining ye. If ye choose, ye may go; but ye'd favor me by going quickly. . . . I give ye," he continued, seeing that she neither moved nor replied, "this one chance. In thirty seconds I turn on the lights."

The woman did not stir; but he thought he could detect in the stillness her quickened breathing.

"What ye've taken," he amended. "I'd thank ye to leave as ye go—if ye came to steal. Tis little I have to lose. . . ."

There was no answer.

He touched the switch with an impatient hand, stepped forward a single pace, caught himself up and stopped short, now pale and trembling who had a moment gone been flushed with calm.

"Beatrix!" he cried thickly.

Dumbly his wife lifted her arms and offered herself to him, unutterably lovely, unspeakably radiant. . . .

It were worse than a waste of time to attempt a portrait of her as she seemed to him. Seen through her husband's eyes, her beauty was incomparable, immaculate, too rare and fine, too delicate a thing to be bodied forth in words, dependent upon the perfection of no single feature. Not in her hair, fair as sunlight on the sea, not in her eyes of autumnal brown, not in the wonderful fineness of her skin or in the daintiness of her features, not in the graciousness of her body, did he find the beauty of her that surpassed expression, but in the love she bore him, in the sweetness of her inviolate soul, in the steadfastness of her impregnable heart. . . .

But it's doubtful if ever he had analyzed his passion for her so minutely. Mostly, I think, at that moment of her abrupt disclosure to him, he longed unutterably for her lips and the proffered wreath round his neck of her slim, round, white arms.

Yet he would not. Trembling though he was, with every instinct and every fiber of his being straining toward her, with the hunger for her a keen pain in his heart, he held himself back; or his conception of honor held him back. That which he had voluntarily forfeited and put away from him for his honor's sake, he would not take back though it were offered freely to him. "So," he said, after a bit, shakily; then pulled himself together, and controlling his voice—"So 'twas yourself, after all, Beatrix! Me heart told me no other woman could have sung that song as ye did—"

The woman dropped her arms. "Your heart, Terence?" she asked a little bitterly.

"What else? Do ye doubt it?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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## A Surmise.

"That," said the musician, "is a Stradivarius. It is worth thousands." "H'm!" replied Mr. Comrox, rather wearily. "I suppose music is something like the drug business. Things cost more when you call 'em by their Latin names."

## Kind of Things to Buy.

"I'm thinking of going on a tour of the Rhine this summer, and I should like your advice about the best things to buy there. You've been there, haven't you?"

"Yes, but it's a long time ago. I shall have to refresh my memory. Waiter, bring the wine card."—Fliegende Blaetter.

## Unappreciative.

"Ha!" mused Noah, as he looked upon the flood from one of the windows of the Ark, "the folks who jeered at me for building this vessel, laughed at me when I told them it was the original water wagon, but they would have fared better had they appreciated in time the dry wit of my little joke."

## His Veracity.

Jim Slocum of Montgomery county, avers the Kansas City Journal, was called as a witness to impeach the testimony of a man in that county. Jim was asked if he was acquainted with the reputation of the witness for truth and veracity. Jim said that he guessed maybe he was.

"Is it good or bad?"

"Well," said Jim, "I don't want to do the man no injustice, but I will say that if his neighbors were to see him looking as if he was dead they would want some corroborating evidence before they would be willing to bury him."

The quarrelsome man should bear in mind that a chip on the shoulder never won a jackpot.

## When the Appetite Lags

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