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. At his apartment, O'Rourke, who had agreed to undertake the mission, finds a mysterious letter. The viscount arrives, hands a sealed package to O'Rourke, who is not to open it until on the ocean. A pair of dainty slippers are seen protruding from under a doorway curtain. The Irishman finds the owner of the mysterious feet to be his wife, Beatrix, from whom he had run away a year previous. They are reconciled, and opening the letter he finds that a Rangoon law firm offers him 100,000 pounds for a jewel known as the Pool of Flame and left to him by a dying friend, but now in keeping of one named Chambret in Algeria. O'Rourke worsts the nobleman in a duel. The wife bids O'Rourke farewell and he promises to soon return with the reward. He discovers both Glynn and the viscount on board the ship.

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

By dawn they were ready to start; and so, in the level rays of a sun that seemed a dazzling sphere of intolerable light, poising itself in the eastern rim of the world as if undecided whether or no to take up its flight across the firmament, the little caravan rocked out into the fastness of the desert, the Irishman in the van sitting a blooded mehari as one to the wilderness born.

On the seventh night they bivouacked hard on the heels of the flying column, having for seven days pursued it this way and that, zigzagging into the heart of the parched land.

Now, when they were come within six hours of their goal, reluctantly, long after nightfall, O'Rourke gave consent to halt, conceding the necessity; for weariness weighed upon their shoulders a great burden, and the camels had become unusually sullen and evil tempered; if rest were denied them presently they would become obstinate and refuse to follow the road.

O'Rourke closed his eyes and lost consciousness with a sensation of falling headlong into a great pit of oblivion, bottomless, eternal. Yet it seemed no more than a moment ere he was sitting up and rubbing sight into his eyes, shaken out of slumber by his guide.

He stumbled to his feet and lurched toward the camels, still but half awake. When his senses cleared irritation possessed him. His guide had been overzealous. He turned upon the man and seized him roughly by the arm.

"What the divvle!" he grumbled angrily, between a yawn and a chatter of teeth—for the air was bitter cold. "The moon's not yet up!"

"Hush, Sidi!" Something in the guide's tone stilled his wrath. "The Touaregg are all about us. They have been passing us throughout the night—"

"Ye knew this and did not wake me?"

"There was no need; we could not have moved ere this without detection. Now, they are all a-stir, and we in the night, may pass for them—until moon-up."

The guide turned away to rouse the mehara, prodding them up, mutinous, snarling and ugly. In another five minutes they were again moving forward. By the time the silver rim of the moon peered over the edge of the east they were pelting on at full speed, as yet, apparently, undetected by the Touaregg.

An hour passed, and the chill in the air became more intense; dawn was at hand. A sense of security, of dangers left behind, came to the Irishman; he began to breathe more freely, though still the polished butt of a repeating rifle swinging from the saddle remained a comfort to his palm. He grew more confident, mentally at ease, seeing the desert take shape in the moonlight and show itself desolate on every hand.

Even as he gained assurance from this thought, the guide turned in his saddle and cried a warning: "The Touaregg!" From that moment on both wielded merciless whips. For out of the moonlit wastes behind them had shrilled a voice, cruel and wild, announcing discovery and the inception of the chase. The fugitives had need of no sharper spur.

A rifle shot rang sharp on the echoes of that cry, but the bullet must have fallen far short. A moment later, indeed, they opened a brisk, scattering fire—naturally ineffectual, though the bullets dropping right and left in the sand proved that the chase had got within range.

Even with that warning, the end was nearer than he had dreamed or hoped. It came in a twinkling and as unexpected as a bolt out of a clear sky: a flash of fire ahead, a spitful snap and—pttt!—the song of a bullet speeding past his head.

The guide pulled up with a jerk. O'Rourke, reining in desperately, swung his camel wide to avert the threatened collision. Simultaneously the sharp "Qui vive?" of a French sentry rang out, loud and sweet to hear.

"Thank God!" said the adventurer in his heart. And aloud, "Friends!" he cried, driving past the sentry in a cloud of dust.

By a blessed miracle the man was quick of wit, and swift to grasp the situation—of which, however, he must have had some warning from the rattle of firing. He screamed something in O'Rourke's ear as the latter passed, and turning threw himself flat and began to pump the trigger of his carbine, emptying the magazine at the on-sweeping line of Touaregg.

The alarm was hardly needed; O'Rourke and the guide swept on over the slip of a depression in the desert and halted in the midst of a camp already quickened and alive with shadowy figures running methodically to their posts, carbine and accoutrement gleaming in the moonlight; men of the camel crops, hardened to and familiar with their work. They buckled down to it in a business-like way that thrilled the heart of O'Rourke. In a trice they were doubling out past lines of tethered mehara, past the white hillocks of the officers' shelter-tents and, like the sentry, throwing themselves down upon the ground to take shelter of whatever inequalities the face of the desert offered; and their firing ringed the bivouac with a fringe of flame.

O'Rourke slipped from his camel and turned to watch the skirmish.

Massed, the Touaregg, in strength greater than the adventurer had believed—something like two hundred mounted men, in all—charged down upon the camp as if to over-run and stampede it.

Yet at the critical moment, when it seemed that of a surety there was no stopping them, they divided and swung round the camp in two wide circles, scattering into open order and firing as they scattered. Here and there a horse fell, a rider threw out his hands and toppled from his saddle, a camel seemed to buckle at full tilt like a faulty piece of machinery; and so gaps appeared in the flying wings.

For the men of the flying column were picked shots. They had need to be, who had such tasks as this to cope with.

Nor—for that matter—were the Touaregg the only sufferers. Here and there in the camp a man plunged forward in mid-stride, and on the firing line beyond the tents now and again a sharpshooter shuddered and lay still upon his arms. Even at O'Rourke's side an officer was shot as he ran to the front, and would have fallen had not the Irishman caught him with ready arms and let him easily to the earth. As he did so the stricken man rolled an agonized eye upward.

"O'Rourke!" he said between a groan and a sigh.

And O'Rourke, kneeling at his side and peering into his face, gave a bitter cry. For he had found Chambret.

CHAPTER VIII.

Preparations for breakfast were toward; an aroma of coffee and bacon hung in the still, crisp air. The troopers were bustling about as if nothing had happened, laughing and joking, cleaning rifles, feeding the mehara, striking tents, drawing water from the palm-ringed well round which the camp had been made.

Out of sight beyond the edge of the sunken oasis a detachment was digging shallow trenches for the dead.

In the open Chambret lay dying, a stark grim figure in the growing light. O'Rourke sat by his side, near the head of the improvised litter, elbow in knee, chin in hand, eyes fixed on the face of his friend.

Just before sunrise the man on the litter stirred, moaned, opened his eyes and turned his head to see O'Rourke. He smiled wanly. "Mon ami," he said in tones faint yet thick.

The Irishman rose. "Don't talk," said he. "I'll be calling the surgeon."

But Chambret stayed him with a gesture. "Has he not told you, dear friend?" he asked.

O'Rourke hesitated. "Told me what?"

"That my wound was fatal—mortal? . . . Surely he must have told you. It is so. Presently I die . . . Content. . . . Let him be—this surgeon: I am beyond his aid. Attend to me, in my last moments, O'Rourke, my friend."

The adventurer vacillated, torn by an agony of compassion. "I must do something for ye," he said miserably. . . . "I must do something. . . . What can I do?"

"Comfort me." The dying man closed his eyes and lay still for a little. "You are not gone, O'Rourke?" he asked presently.

"I'm here, be your side, mon ami."

"Tell me . . . of madame . . . your wife. She is well?"

"She is very well, Chambret."

"You have seen her recently?"

"Within ten days."

"You have . . . returned to her?"

"No—and yes. 'Twas not for lack of love for her that I gave her up—"

"Yes," said Chambret impatiently. "That I understand. . . . I comprehend utterly your feeling. . . . But you owe her happiness, though you sacrifice your own—everything—to give it her. She loves you . . . as she might have loved even me had you not come into her life."

"True. . . ."

"You are about to pocket your scruples that she may have her due portion of happiness?"

"I've promised, Chambret."

"I am glad. . . . But you—what has brought you hither?"

"I—I wished to see ye."

But the dying are oftentimes and strangely endowed with curious insight into matters beyond their ken. Without perceptible hesitation Chambret made this apparent.

"You have come for the ruby," he said with conviction.

"How did ye know?"

"It is true, then? . . . I fancied so; I knew that some day you would come to claim it. . . . Bend nearer to me. . . . The Pool of Flame is in the keeping of my good friend, the Governor-General of Algeria. It is all arranged. When I am gone, take my signet ring, tell him your name, and demand the package—a small morocco-leather box, wrapped in plain brown paper and superscribed with my name and yours. He knows nothing of its value, save that it is great, and will deliver it to you and only you without question. . . . That is all."

The hand that clasped O'Rourke's was like ice.

"Chambret!"

"Beatrix. . . ."

The cold fingers relaxed. Gently O'Rourke disengaged his hand and put it to the pitiful, torn bosom of the man who had died with his wife's name upon his lips.

CHAPTER IX.

Shortly before midnight the triweekly train from Constantine to Algiers pulled up over an hour late at the town of El-Guerrah. It took up a single passenger, discharged none, and presently thundered on westwards, rocking and jarring over a road-bed certainly no better than it should have been. Such, at least, was the passenger's criticism, as, groaning in anticipation of the long night of discomfort ahead of him, he disposed himself and his belongings about the cushions of the first-class compartment which he occupied in solitary grandeur.

O'Rourke had no intention of leaving anything undone that might tend to mitigate the terrors of the journey.

Five days had elapsed since that morning in the oasis. In the interval he had again dared the danger of the desert, returning to Biskra alone by a route more direct than that which had brought him up with the flying column. Discharging the guide with a gratuity larger than his ebbing means warranted, he had proceeded to El-Guerrah by the first daily train, and so now found himself on the direct line of communication with Algiers and the Governor-General.

His chiefest concern now lay with the future and the Pool of Flame; both bulked large upon the horizon and were at once the architects and the nuclei of a thousand different plans of action.

So far, the affair had worked smoothly; he anticipated little trouble.

So thinking he drowsed, and in the course of time lulled by the hammering of a flat-wheel at the forward end of the coach, fell asleep. He wakened suddenly after a nap of some two hours or so, to a confusion of impressions: that the train had stopped; that some one had invaded his compartment; that a cold blast was blowing across his wrists. Bewildered and not half master of his senses, he started up and fell back with a thud, assisted to resume a recumbent position by a heavy blow upon his chest, delivered by some person for the moment unknown. Simultaneously he was aware of a clicking sound, followed by the sensation of being unable to move his feet; and then, the clouds clearing from his understanding, he realized that the cold upon his wrists was that of steel. With handcuffs also on his ankles, he lay helpless, unable even to protest because of a cloth wadded tightly into his mouth and a firm hand that prevented ejection.

Other hands were rifling his pockets, swiftly but after a bungling fashion. The train, having paused briefly at Setif (he afterwards located the station by conjecture), began to move again, was presently in full thundering flight. Abruptly the examination of his person—which was so thorough that it included the opening of his shirt to assure the thieves that he carried nothing in the shape of a money-belt—was concluded and the adventurer was roughly jerked into a sitting position. At the same time his gag was removed.

He gasped, blinked, coughed, and rolled a resentful eye around the compartment. "Be the powers!" he said huskily; and no more. At first glance it became apparent that he had miscalculated the audacity and resource of the vicomte and Mr. Glynn. They had literally caught him napping.

The Honorable Bertie, O'Rourke discovered kneeling in the act of turning the adventurer's traveling gear inside out; at least, he seemed to be trying to do so. Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes on the contrary was seated at ease, facing O'Rourke, a revolver on the cushion beside him, his interest concentrated not upon his captive, upon his collaborator. O'Rourke remarked an expression on the Frenchman's face, a curious compound of eagerness, triumph and apprehension.

Without noting the Irishman's ejeculation, he addressed Glynn: "Find it?"

"No—worse luck!" grumbled the Englishman, rising and kicking the hand-bag savagely. "There isn't so much as a scrap of paper anywhere about him."

The vicomte favored O'Rourke with a vicious glance, muttering something about a thousand devils. The Irishman, quick to grasp the situation and inwardly exulting, acknowledged Des Trebes' attention with a winning smile.

They Had Literally Caught Him Napping.

"Good evening," he said, and nodded amiably.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped the Honorable Bertie, unhandsomely. "Where's that letter?"

O'Rourke chuckled. "Ye're a hard loser, me bright young friend," he commented. "I though Englishmen always played the game as it laid."

Glynn grunted and flushed, shame-faced, but the Frenchman cut short the retort on his lips by a curt repetition of Glynn's own question:

"Where's that letter, monsieur?"

O'Rourke glanced at him languidly, yawned, and smiled an exasperating strictly personal smile. Then significantly he clinked the handcuffs until they rang on wrist and ankle.

"Answer me!" snarled the vicomte, picking up his revolver.

"Divvle a word," observed O'Rourke, "will ye get from me if ye shoot me dead, monsieur le vicomte. Put down your pistol and be sensible."

Des Trebes' face darkened, suffused with the blood of his rage. Yet the man asserted that admirable control of self which he was able to employ when it suited his purposes. Evidently, too, he recognized the cold common-sense of the wanderer's remark. At all events he put aside the weapon.

"Where's the letter?" he demanded again, more pacifically.

Again O'Rourke yawned with malice prepense, yawned deliberately and exhaustively and dispassionately. "Not a word," he volunteered at length, "until ye loose me hands and feet. Which," he added, "ye need not hesitate to do, for I'll not strike back—unless ye crowd me."

The vicomte scowled darkly for a moment, plainly dubious. Then presumably upon the consideration that he could trust O'Rourke's word and that most assuredly he would learn nothing from him until his request was complied with, he growled an order to Glynn to unlock and remove the handcuffs. The Englishman obeyed.

Free, O'Rourke stretched himself, rubbed his wrists, and observed a collection of his pocket hardware lying upon the seat by him, thrown aside by Glynn in his disgust at not finding what he sought.

"Ye'll not be wanting to deprive me of these few trifles, me gay highwaymen, I'm thinking?" he inquired placidly of the pair. "If ye've no objection I'll make so free as to take back me own."

"Take what you want," returned Des Trebes in an ugly tone. "But—I give you three minutes to tell me where you have put that letter."

"Indeed? Your courtesy overpowers me." The Irishman took up his watch and calmly made a note of the hour—hard upon three in the morning; then, with easy nonchalance stowed it away with the rest of the miscellaneous collection—the knives, coins and keys, his wallet, tickets and so forth.

"Your time," the voice of the vicomte interrupted this occupation, "is up." He fingered his revolver "Where is that letter? I am losing patience."

"Where rust nor moth cannot corrupt nor thieves break in to steal," O'Rourke misquoted solemnly. "Steady. Don't call names—or I'll forget meself. I mean that the letter is in fragments, scattered to the four winds of heaven, destroyed. There ye have your answer. Ye fools, did ye think I would carry it about me?"

"By God!" said Glynn tensely. "No—don't shoot him, Des Trebes! He's telling the truth. Make him tell what was in the letter."

"I'm afraid 'tis useless," O'Rourke mocked them. "I have forgotten the contents. What use to me to remember?" he demanded, inspired. "What made ye think I would have it at all? Sure, and the letter was properly Chambret's. Why would I not turn it over to him?"

"Oh, cut it!" Glynn interrupted impatiently. "We know he's dead. The news was heliographed in from the column day before yesterday."

"Quite so. Yet, if ye know so much, if—as I gather—ye suspect that Chambret turned over this precious jewel to me, why do ye not demand it as well as the letter? Not that I have either."

"Because we jolly well know you haven't got the ruby," blurted the Englishman.

"Be quiet," snapped the vicomte.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Reading maketh a full man. So does the wine when it's red.

Perhaps Lot's wife was turned to salt because she was too peppery.

It Does.

"Do you find this presidential preferential primary puzzling?"

"Well, it makes you mind your p's."

The Worst of It.

"Do you keep a cook, Mrs. Subub "

"Madam, I not only keep the cook, but also her entire family."

Only Thinking.

"Where are you thinking of going this summer?"

"I'm thinking of England, Norway, and Scotland, but I'll probably go to Punk Beach."

How He Got Them.

"Dat feller 'Rastus Skinah done bin talkin' a powahful lot 'bout how he's a-raisin' chickens."

"Sho! He doan' mean 'raisin',' he means 'liftin'."—Catholic Standard and Times.

The Worm's Way.

"The Hon. Stephen Coleridge, the English anti-vivisectionist," said an anti-vivisectionist of Philadelphia, "is delighted with the recent English vivisection report, which promises to abolish even the use of the live bait in fishing.

"Mr. Coleridge once argued here in Philadelphia about the cruelty of fishing with worms.

"'Oh,' his opponent said, 'the mere fact that a worm writhes and wriggles when impaled on a hook is no proof that it is actually suffering pain.'

"'No, oh, no!' said Mr. Coleridge, sarcastically. 'Beyond doubt that is just the worm's way of laughing at being tickled.'"