

The Lad of the Spur

By David Copper

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CHAPTER IV—Continued.

"May be you have my dear."
"Yes, I have and what do you think?"
"I don't know, but I'm rather sick of all this!"
"Squire Arnold!" cried the old woman. "You don't say! What did you tell him?"
"I told him 'no' of course."
"Yes, yes—to be sure, you did."
"But he was quite—quite bullying over it."
"He'd better leave you be" said the other man. "More than one of the boys in the swamp would see Squire Arnold had an accident, if I say the word. Only one man's got to marry you, and we know who he is—"

"I was rather sickened by the frequency of the woman's 'my dear.' There was a touch of sympathy about it that I did not fancy. However, her face and laugh were genuine—in spite of her ugly pet. I had at last found one point in the conversation to cling to. I remembered the Mr. Lawrence Arnold who had been in attendance at Morvan, the day I had taken possession of the estate."

He had stood beside Bram Morvan when the latter had welcomed me, heartily enough, at the door of the manor house. Arnold was much the same sort as Bram—a country gentleman, although neither so riotous nor so frank in manner as his "cousin." I had guessed they were Damon and Pythias to each other.

My act of usurpation had been made absurdly easy. It had occurred to no one that I was other than I seemed—Harry Morvan returned to his ancestral home for the first time since his earliest boyhood. I had hardly played a part—I had had only to accept one-to-two of the duties that were awaiting me. My twenty years' absence from West Jersey—as was believed by all—excused me for what slips I made, and they were not many.

But, upon the other hand, my fear of making a fatal mistake had kept me from learning many things during my two days at home—things that now, lurking in the darkness outside the cabin window, I longed very heartily to know.

Exasperated at my ignorance, I ground my heel into the earth. It was soft covered with pine needles and fallen boughs—a twigs cracked under my boot.

The Lady of the Spur was instantly upon her feet, her eyes luminous beneath her dark brows.

"What was that?"
"That snappin' sound?" asked the old woman.

"Yes, there's somebody there!"
"Oh, no. It's only the cold makin' the trees crack. It's all the time 'doin' it, cold night like this—gettin' us to winter. You're nervous, my dear."

The girl's eyes were still luminous. She gazed so intently that I began to fear she had indeed made out my face through the opening in the shutter. I pulled my hat well over my brows that my eyes might not reflect the light.

Presently her body relaxed. Her mouth drooped, and a tired sigh escaped her.

"Yes, I am nervous," she said, "and, Mary, I feel sleepy. Perhaps it was the tea. I'd feel better if I could sleep. But this isn't the place for a nap." She glanced about her with a barely repressed sigh.

"Besides it's time to start home—I mustn't stay any longer."
"No, no, my dear," protested the Swede. "Sleep a little while—not! Nobody's here but your old Mary—she'll wake you in half an hour. You've plenty of time. No use in hurrying off. You don't suppose your father's sittin' up for you, eh? Not hardly!"

"Suppose he should miss me some night, Mary? If he should ever find out what his daughter is doing while he sleeps—"

with a feeling of disgust. One is not used to associating white hair with ribald songs, nor kind-faced old women with treacherous serpents.

Had it not been for the girl sleeping in the next room, I would have left the cabin, with its peculiar occupants, to the darkness and the pines. I had learned nothing, yet there must be something to learn. Two hours or so before, driven to distraction by Bramford Morvan's company, I had gone for a ride, only to have my horse bolt and brush me off against a drooping bough.

Then, by sheer good luck, I had obtained the thing which, insecure in my new position, I had not yet dared to seek—another glimpse of the Lady of the Spur who had warned me from Morvan. Trudging homeward on foot after my fall, I had caught sight of a girl, mounted on a grey gelding, stealing cautiously through the woods. A strange fancy for late riding!

Myself unseen, I had followed her to this lonely cabin. Her 'night was cold, and the trees whispered mournfully overhead. Deep in the forest a screech owl sounded its weird note.

I reflected that this part of the country was none too safe, and I had not thought to bring my pistols. If any of the charcoal burners I had heard mentioned were to stumble upon me lurking here, I was likely to be biassed out of hand—perhaps deserved to be for spying in such fashion. Yes, the library at Morvan was a safer place for me—but the girl!

As I stood debating, a sharp whistle sounded from the opposite side of the cabin.

The Swede started up, heedless of her pet's head, which slipped smartly to the floor. The snake hissed angrily.

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"I'm comin'," called the woman. "I'm comin', Squire! Who'd let you in, if it wasn't your old Mary? But her bones are stiff—yes, yer bones are old and stiff." She unlocked the door with trembling fingers.

"Come in, come in, sir! Ah, there you are! You're a handsome gentleman, don't you hear? Yes, yes, it's my hand—some young man." She hobbled eagerly to the outer door. "He'll find something here for him—something soft and dainty, eh?"

There was a sharp knocking, and the white-haired woman opened the door.

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He hesitated a moment, then lifted his cup with jovial sentimentality. "I meant the Flower of Morvan township—the Flower of the Pines—the Wildflower of the Swamp, by gad! Mary Pederson of Lost Hollow, and 'Wriggles' of—of the devil, I give you a toast. Here's to the brownest beauty that ever showed a neat bare ankle—here's to pretty Sue Buckaloo!"

"Sue Buckaloo!" cried the Swede. "Are you after her, Squire?"
"After her—that's the very word," responded the careless fellow. "I'm after her so hard that I've already had a good slap or two from Sue. Her blackfaced old father has threatened to blow my head off with his shotgun, too. I'm after her, but I don't mind telling you, Mary, that I don't think I'll ever get her."

"I'm glad of it," retorted the old woman with spirit. She snatched the cup and bottle from his hands. "Why, Squire! Would you chase after a charcoal burner's daughter, when the other's just waitin' for you?"

Bram's eyes followed the liquor languidly. He broke into a snarl.

"There you go! You always spoil my best dreams, Mary. I wasn't talking about marrying Sue, was I? Besides, the other girl isn't waitin' for me. By gad, no! I'm beginnin' to think that's only another one of our dreams."

The Swede knit his brows and placed her hand affectionately on his knee.

"Oh, yes, my dear," she said softly. "She's waitin' for you. To be sure, she don't know she is! But she's waitin' for you—here—now."

"Here? What do you mean?"
"Why—what I say, my dear, to be sure." He started down at her. "She's here—in this shanty—at this time of night!"

"Yes, yes, I sent her a letter. I said I wanted to talk over things with her. I told her not to come till late—I'd be away with a sick woman. Yes, yes, nurlin! A sick woman in the swamp!"

"She came, but she wouldn't touch food nor drink. But, by and by, little 'Wriggles' scared her, so she took some tea for her nerves. After that she went to sleep, and very pretty she must look, sleepin' there so sweet!"

His eyes sought the inner room. In there, he said, she would be waiting.

"Yes! She was looking up at him, her white hair beautiful in the freelight. "She'll stay asleep for an hour yet, Squire—I made the tea. Yes, yes, I made the tea." She gave her little, silvery laugh.

Bram's face turned a shade redder than usual. He sprang to his feet. "By God, you are a devil!"

"Eh, Squire!" She scanned his glowering face. "Didn't you just tell me you were after Sue Buckaloo? Is this any different, eh?"

He sat down heavily. "Sue Buckaloo's only a pinner's daughter," he growled. "I was damned already, but I won't have this on my soul."

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"By gad, boys," declared Bram. "I was so mixed up with that cursed snake I only saw the scoundrel's boots—they looked too good for a pinner's!" He laughed merrily. "Yes, or for me, for that matter. Well, give it up, I'm only wonderin' how much he heard."

"How much?" repeated Davis. "Not a thing. Nothin' had been said, I reckon—nothin' to hurt. Don't you remember, Squire, you was just 'out' to begin?"

"That's all," said Bram. "I'm sure," returned Bram. "But I'd be talking before you came in."

"About this business, Squire?"
"Yes—no, not exactly. It was—hum—"

His follower broke into a knowing laugh. "Ha, ha! Squire! You're talkin' about your side issue, I reckon. Wasn't that it? Side issue and side saddle, so to speak. Well, I guess that ain't agoin' to hang no body—not even you. Ha, ha! What's a little love makin'! I reckon you can trust the side saddle, eh?"

"Oh, of course. But I'd like to know what you mean. He might make things pretty awkward for me." Bram's tone sounded decidedly sheepish.

"Mebbe he didn't hear nothin', Squire," suggested Lena. "Morn' likely he's some oysterman who lost his way, and first thing he knew, he rolled slap down the hollow. He might make things pretty awkward for me." Bram's tone sounded decidedly sheepish.

"The sound of their voices and footsteps died away through the pines, but for a long time I did not care to stir. Not three yards from my ear, a screech owl began to hoot most lamentably. The world cry made me shiver.

Though a man may run ten yards in a second, and ten yards might mean life, yet for a full second I gazed at her. Then she caught a sobbing breath—the candle was extinguished.

I bounded into the thicket.

CHAPTER VI.

The Forest Path.

By hard running I reached the wooded ridge well ahead of my pursuers. Obedient to "Brownie's" Davis' commands, they were pushing straight through briar and undergrowth, whereas, had they kept to the path up which I was running, they might have overtaken me almost at once.

As it was, in three minutes I was half way across the "neck." I was beginning to laugh to myself over the pinner's certain chagrin, when, in the darkness, I ran headlong against the stump of a tree. The shock was so severe that I turned quite faint for a moment. I thought I had been struck from ambush.

I clung, gasping, to the pine trunk until the first giddiness passed off. Then I started on, but one stride proved I was too much shaken to keep up the pace. I staggered and nearly fell.

"Brownie's" voice rang out a few rods and I turned to see what was the matter. The bottom, Bill—he might take to the woods!"

The sound of men forcing their way through the woods drew nearer every instant. I would be caught like a crippled cat—without the power of resistance.

Summoning all my resolution, I stumbled a few rods, gained a dense thicket of scrub pines, and was dragging myself into their cover, when I realized that it was one of the very places my pursuers would be likely to search most thoroughly.

My motions had dissipated my giddiness. I gripped the bough of a ten-foot scrub pine, and pressed myself into its top. I sank into the bushy dome, as hidden as if I were in the moon.

I was barely in time. Three or four dark figures burst into the path I had just quitted.

"Forward!"—it was Bram's voice—"He can't be far!"

"Look out for the blasted pine, Squire!" called one of the men.

"Eh! Oh, I didn't sit at table long after you went the grand tour. Nobody ever thought to show you the old family skeleton, or, may be, everybody thought it best to keep the dusty bones locked up in the closet."

"A bad habit," I remarked with due gravity.

"Damnable! Downright damnable! I'd reform, but what else is there for me to do in this accursed hole!"

"Come, come! I won't join you in cursing Morvan, until I know a little more about it. Besides, man, you aren't forgotten to stay here. You've income enough of your own to do as you please."

"Income to do as I please? No, not a tenth of it." He broke an egg with a vindictive gesture. "Dye see, Hal, I can't live quiet anywhere—it isn't in me. I'm no pinner—I've got to have my fling. I'm a great sitch that seemed to come from the toes of his boots. 'By gad, Hal, mornings after I've had a bottle too much, I wish I wasn't such a rip. Well, I'm off—a stiff ride will take this bad taste out of my mouth."

He stamped from the room. Long after the coffee had grown cold, I sat pondering what he had said.

Perhaps no man, even in a plain way of life, may clearly set down all that he thinks or the reasons that lead him to action. And my way was by no means plain.

This thing I resolved upon at last—to hold myself only as a Morvan—to do what Henry Morvan wished to do better than he in the flesh. Yet every moment I so bore myself, I was keeping a lovely girl from her heritage. So be it! Judge for what I had seen the night before at the cabin in Lost Hollow. Ferris Dayton deserved small consideration.

CHAPTER VIII.

A Morning Ride.

When at length I roused myself, I called for a horse and, following Bram's example, went for a ride. As yet I had hardly had time to go over "my" land.

It was a charming day in the early fall, and I felt a pleasant, but under the circumstances, a deluding sense of power, to see the estate, surrounded by a good two miles in every direction from the house-crowned hill. To the eyes of one of Henry Morvan's English friends the property might have looked wild enough, for full half of it was clothed in shaggy forests, and about the rest well kept roads and trim lawns were none too plentiful. But the Boy White in the bushes and the bushes and down by the lake where the upland melted into the pines, some wild ducks were preening themselves in the sun.

At wide intervals in the great forest, columns of smoke went straight up in the air. "Charcoal burners," I reflected, "are to be seen in the woods. There's to the brownest beauty that ever showed a neat bare ankle—here's to Sue Buckaloo!"

Impelled by a vague curiosity, I marked the location of the nearest column of smoke, and picked my way toward it through the pines. I judged that the charcoal burners, if they were really such, was within my bounds, and might well ride in that direction as any other.

So shortly I came upon a little cottage—a home of the poorest sort, but astonishingly neat and well kept. There was even a split rail fence, serving to mark off a small flower garden—a thing beyond the ordinary for a pinner's homestead.

No one seemed to have noticed my approach. While I sat my horse rather at a loss, I heard voices on the other side of the cottage. I dismounted and sauntered around the corner.

A man whom I recognized as Bram's friend, Mr. Lawrence Arnold, was talking earnestly to a girl. The girl's face, eyes, and hair, were all so lovely, that I was fain to look on rather soon, disclosed a neat pair of ankles. It was Sue Buckaloo, beyond a doubt.

At the moment I appeared their conversation was brought to a peculiar close. As Arnold leaned eagerly over her, she struck him smartly on the cheek with her open hand.

"There!" she cried. "Go, talk to one of your own people, who can't help herself. You ain't my landlord. You can't turn my dad out to starve, like you did Letty Miller's."

Arnold was by no means abashed. "Come, come, girl, know your place." He returned, rubbing his cheek angrily. "It's the way you treat a gentleman? Your pretty face has spoiled you, Sue."

"You better get out o' here before dad gets back," said the girl, frowning. "He's mighty quick with his scater gun."

"He'll repent it if he takes a high hand with me," said Arnold. "Now, Sue, be reasonable. You'd deal better agree—"

"Good morning," I interrupted, advancing. "May I venture to ask what's the matter in dispute? I hope my tenant hasn't been disrespectful to you, Mr. Arnold."

"The girl fell back with a muttered cry: 'The saw snare!' and stood watching me curiously. Arnold's face grew red, but he lost nothing of his self-possession."

"Oh! Good morning, Mr. Morvan. No, no! It's all right. I'm willing to make allowance for the whims of a spoiled beauty. I know a little about women. Sue, here, is a pretty and she knows it. Too much attention has about turned her little head, by gad!"

"Very likely," I rejoined pleasantly. "The best remedy is to leave her alone, isn't it? You remember the old song?—'If she be not fair to me'?"

My easy-going manner had completely deceived the girl. She fumbled in her pocket, and producing a clay pipe, began to fill it with canaster.

"No doubt that would serve her right to leave her in the sulks, but, d'ye see, Mr. Morvan, she's too pretty to let alone. It would be a crime, no less, to let a figure and face like Sue's go to waste. She's worth some trouble, you understand, eh?"

"I'm not sure I do."

He gave a careless laugh. "I mean I've just been telling Sue she's wasting herself down here in the Barrens. I've offered to take her to the city for a month or so—let her see the world and live like a lady. I'll look out for her afterward, too. That's fair enough, I take it. As a man of the world, Mr. Morvan, you'll understand a gentleman doesn't expect a girl's temper over such a chance will last. Eh? What do you think?"

I saw the girl's eyes flash. She opened her lips as to speak, but at a sign from me, closed them and said nothing.

"Sir," I said deliberately, "I think such an action as you propose, more suited to a Don Juan than to an American gentleman."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you are playing the part of a second-rate Don Juan."

"Be careful what you say, Mr. Morvan. I'm not a patient man."

"As impatient as you choose, sir. I mean what I say."

He gave me a very ugly look. The pipe snapped between his fingers. "There's a way for satisfaction between gentlemen, Mr. Morvan. You understand me?"

"Certainly." I'm at your disposal any hour of the day. No—not earlier than 8 o'clock. I never could endure a meeting at dawn."

My coolness-my contemptuous attempt at humor—nonplussed him. Perhaps had I blustered more, he would have known better how to deal with me. With a gasp, his face turned purple, and he gulped down his wrath.

"You're a newcomer in the county, Mr. Morvan—you don't understand our ways. I'm willing to overlook your words."

"Oh, you were away at school. Then

(To Be Continued)