

THE CONQUEST of CANAAN

By BOOTH TARKINGTON,
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"It's all right, Claudine," he repeated. "It's all right."

He was moving to lay his hat on the desk when his eye caught first the roses, then fell upon Ariel, and he stopped stock still with one arm outstretched, remaining for perhaps ten seconds in that attitude, while she, her lips parted, her eyes lustrous, returned his gaze with a look that was as inscrutable as it was kind.

"Yes," she said, as if in answer to a question, "I have come here twice today." She nodded slightly toward Mrs. Fear. "I can wait. I am very glad you bring good news."

Joe turned dazedly toward the other. "Claudine," he said, "you've been telling Miss Tabor."

"I certainly have!" Mrs. Fear's expression had cleared, and her tone was cheerful. "I don't see no harm in that. I'm sure she's a good friend of yours, Mr. Loudon."

Joe glanced at Ariel with a faint, troubled smile and turned again to Mrs. Fear. "I've had a long talk with Happy."

"I'm awful glad. Is he ready to listen to reason?" she asked with a titter. "He's waiting for you."

"Where?" She rose quickly. "Stop," said Joe sharply. "You must be very careful with him."

"Don't you s'pose I'm goin' to be?" she interrupted, with a catch in her voice. "Don't you s'pose I've had trouble enough?"

"No," said Joe deliberately and impersonally, "I don't. Unless you keep remembering to be careful all the time you'll follow the first impulse you have, as you did yesterday, and your excuse will be that you never thought any harm would come of it. He's in a queer mood, but he will forgive you if you ask him."

"Well, ain't that what I want to do?" she exclaimed.

"I know, I know," he said, dropping into the desk chair and passing his hand over his eyes with a gesture of infinite weariness. "But you must be very careful. I hunted for him most of the night and all day. He was trying to keep out of my way because he didn't want me to find him until he had met this fellow Nashville. Happy is a hard man to come at when he doesn't care to be found, and he kept shifting from place to place until I ran him down. Then I got him in a corner and told him that you hadn't meant any harm—which is always true of you, poor woman—and I didn't leave him till he had promised me to forgive you if you would come and ask him. And you must keep him out of Cory's way until I can arrange to have him—Cory, I mean—sent out of town. Will you?"

"Why, certainly," she answered, smiling. "That Nashville's the verry last person I ever want to see again—the fresh thing!" Mrs. Fear's burden had fallen; her relief was perfect, and she beamed rapidly. But Joe marked her renewed irresponsibility with an anxious eye.

"You mustn't make any mistakes," he said, rising stiffly with fatigue.

"Not me. I don't take no more chances," she responded, tittering happily; "not after yesterday. My, but it's a load off my shoulders! I do hate it to have gentlemen quarreling over me, especially Mr. Fear. I never did like to start anything. I like to see people laugh and be friendly, and I'm mighty glad it's all blown over. I kind o' thought it would all along. Pshaw! She burst into genuine, noisy laughter. "I don't expect either of em meant no real harm to each other after they got cooled off a little. If they'd met today they'd probably both run. Now, Mr. Loudon, where's Happy?"

Joe went to the door with her. He waited a moment, perplexed; then his brow cleared, and he said in a low voice: "You know the alley beyond Vent Miller's poolroom? Go down the alley till you come to the second gate. Go in, and you'll see a basement door opening into a little room under Miller's bar. The door won't be locked, and Happy's in there waiting for you. But remember—"

"Oh, don't you worry!" she cut him off loudly. "I know him. Inside of an hour I'll have him laughin' over all this. You'll see!"

When she had gone he stood upon the landing looking thoughtfully after her. "Perhaps, after all, that is the best mood to let her meet him in," he murmured.

Then, with a deep breath, he turned. The heavy perfume had gone, the air was clear and sweet, and Ariel was pressing her face into the roses again. As he saw how like them she was he was shaken with a profound and mysterious sigh, like that which moves in the breast of one who listens in the dark to his dearest music.

CHAPTER XV.

"I KNOW how tired you are," said Ariel as he came back into the room. "I shall not keep you long."

"Ah, please do!" he returned quickly, beginning to fumble with the shade of a student lamp at one end of the desk.

"Let me do that," she said. "Sit down." He obeyed at once and watched her as she lit the lamp and, stretching upon tiptoe, turned out the gas.

"No," she continued, seated again and looking across the desk at him, "I wanted to see you at the first possible opportunity, but what I have to say—" "Wait," he interrupted. "Let me tell you why I did not come yesterday."

"You need not tell me. I know." She glanced at the chair which had been occupied by Mrs. Fear. "I knew last night that they had sent for you."

"You did?" he exclaimed. "Ah, I understand! Sam Warden must have told you."

"Yes," she said. "It was he. And I have been wondering ever since how he heard of it. He knew last night, but there was nothing in the papers this morning, and until I came here I heard no one else speak of it. Yet Canaan is not large."

Joe laughed. "It wouldn't seem strange if you lived with the Canaan that I do. Sam had been downtown during the afternoon and had met friends. The colored people are a good deal like a freemasonry, you know. A great many knew last night all about what had happened and had their theories about what might happen today in case the two men met. Still, you see, those who knew also knew just what people not to tell. The Tocsin is the only newspaper worth the name here. But even if the Tocsin had known of the trouble it wouldn't have been likely to mention it. That's a thing I don't understand." He frowned and rubbed the back of his head. "There's something underneath it. For more than a year the Tocsin hasn't spoken of Beaver Beach. I'd like to know why."

"Joe," she said slowly, "tell me something truly. A man said to me yesterday that he found life here insufferable. Do you find it so?"

"Why, no!" he answered, surprised. "Do you hate Canaan?"

"Certainly not!"

"You don't find it dull, provincial, unsympathetic?"

He laughed cheerily. "Well, there's this," he explained. "I have an advantage over your friend. I see a more interesting side of things probably. The people I live among are pretty thorough cosmopolites in a way, and the life is lead."

"I think I begin to understand a little about the life you lead," she interrupted. "Then you don't complain of Canaan?"

"Of course not."

She threw him a quick, bright, happy look, then glanced again at the chair in which Mrs. Fear had sat. "Joe," she said, "last night I heard the people singing in the houses, the old Sunday evening way. It took me back so!"

"Yes, it would. And something else. There's one hymn they sing more than any other. It's Canaan's favorite. Do you know what it is?"

"Is it 'Rescue the Perishing'?"

"That's it. 'Rescue the Perishing!'" he cried and, repeating the words again, gave forth a peal of laughter so hearty that it brought tears to his eyes. "Rescue the Perishing!"

At first she did not understand his laughter, but after a moment she did and joined her own to it, though with a certain tremulousness.

"It is funny, isn't it?" said Joe, wiping the moisture from his eyes. Then all trace of mirth left him. "Is it really you, sitting here and laughing with me, Ariel?"

"It seems to be," she answered in a low voice. "I'm not at all sure."

"You didn't think yesterday afternoon," he began almost in a whisper—"you didn't think that I had failed to come because I—"

He grew very red and shifted the sentence awkwardly. "I was afraid you might think that I was—that I didn't come because I might have been the same way again that I was when—I met you at the station?"

"Oh, no!" she answered gently. "No, I knew better."

"And do you know," he faltered, "that that is all over? That it can never happen again?"

"Yes, I know it," she returned quickly.

"Then you know a little of what I owe you."

"No, no," she protested. "Yes," he said. "You've made that change in me already. It wasn't hard—it won't be—though it might have been if—I hadn't come soon."

"Tell me something," she demanded. "If these people had not sent for you yesterday, would you have come to Judge Pike's house to see me? You said you would try." She laughed a little and looked away from him. "I want to know if you would have come."

There was a silence, and in spite of her averted glance she knew that he was looking at her steadily. Finally, "Don't you know?" he said.

She shook her head and blushed faintly.

"Don't you know?" he repeated.

She looked up and met his eyes, and thereupon both became very grave.

"Yes, I do," she answered. "You would have come. When you left me at the gate and went away you were afraid. But you would have come."

"Yes, I'd have come. You are right. I was afraid at first, but I knew," he went on rapidly, "that you would have come to the gate to meet me."

"You understood that?" she cried, her eyes sparkling and her face flushing happily.

"Yes. I knew that you wouldn't have asked me to come," he said, with a catch in his voice which was half chuckle, half groan, "if you hadn't meant to take care of me. And it came to me that you would know how to do it."

She leaned back in her chair, and again they laughed together, but only for a moment, becoming serious and very quiet almost instantly.

"I haven't thanked you for the roses," he said.

"Oh, yes, you did! When you first looked at them."

"So I did," he whispered. "I'm glad you saw. To find them here took my breath away—and to find you with them!"

"I brought them this morning, you know."

"Would you have come if you had not understood why I failed yesterday?"

"Oh, yes, I think so!" she returned, the fine edge of a smile upon her lips. "For a time last evening, before I heard what had happened, I thought you were too frightened a friend to bother about."

He made a little ejaculation, partly joyful, partly sad.

"And yet," she went on, "I think that I should have come this morning after all even if you had a poorer excuse for your absence, because, you see, I came on business."

"You did?"

"That's why I've come again. That makes it respectable for me to be here now, doesn't it—for me to have come out alone after dark without their knowing it? I'm here as your client, Joe."

"Why?" he asked.

She did not answer at once, but picked up a pen from beneath her hand on the desk and, turning it, meditatively felt its point with her forefinger before she said slowly, "Are most men careful of other people's—well, of other people's money?"

"You mean Martin Pike?" he asked.

"Yes. I want you to take charge of everything I have for me."

He bent a frowning regard upon the lampshade. "You ought to look after your own property," he said. "You surely have plenty of time."

"You mean—you mean you won't help me?" she returned, with intentional pathos.

"Ariel!" he laughed shortly in answer; then asked, "What makes you think Judge Pike isn't trustworthy?"

"Nothing very definite perhaps, unless it was his look when I told him that I meant to ask you to take charge of things for me."

"He's been rather hard pressed this year, I think," said Joe. "You might be right—if he could have found a way. I hope he hasn't."

"I'm afraid," she began gayly, "that I know very little of my own affairs. He sent me a draft every three months,



"Joe," she cried in a voice of great pain, "you mustn't feel like that!"

with receipts and other things to sign and return to him. I haven't the faintest notion of what I own—except the old house and some money from the income that I hadn't used and brought with me. Judge Pike has all the papers—everything."

Joe looked troubled. "And Roger Tabor, did he?"

"The dear man!" She shook her head. "He was just the same. To him poor Uncle Jonas' money seemed to come from heaven through the hands of Judge Pike."

"And there's a handsome roundabout way!" said Joe.

"Wasn't it!" she agreed cheerfully. "And he trusted the judge absolutely. I don't, you see."

He gave her a thoughtful look and nodded. "No, he isn't a good man," he said, "not even according to his lights, but I doubt if he could have managed to get away with anything of consequence after he became the administrator. He wouldn't have tried it probably unless he was more desperately pushed than I think he has been. It would have been too dangerous. Suppose you wait a week or so and think it over."

"But there's something I want you to do for me immediately, Joe."

"What's that?"

"I want the old house put in order. I'm going to live there."

"Alone?"

"I'm almost twenty-seven, and that's being enough of an old maid for me to risk Canaan's thinking me eccentric, isn't it?"

"It will think anything you do is all right."

"And once," she cried, "it thought everything I did wrong!"

"Yes. That's the difference."

"You mean it will commend me because I'm thought rich?"

"No, no," he said meditatively, "it isn't that. It's because everybody will be in love with you."

"Quite everybody!" she asked.

"Certainly," he replied. "Anybody who didn't would be absurd."

"Ah, Joe!" she laughed. "You always were the nicest boy in the world, my dear!"

At that he turned toward her with a sudden movement, and his lips parted, but not to speak. She had rested one arm upon the desk and her cheek upon her hand; the pen she had picked up, still absently held in her fingers, touching her lips, and it was given to him to know that he would never write with it again. The soft lamplight fell across the lower part of her face, leaving her eyes, which were lowered thoughtfully, in the shadow of her hat. The room was blotted out in darkness behind her. Like the background of an antique portrait, the office, with its dusty corners and shelves and hideous safe, had vanished, leaving the charming and thoughtful face revealed against an even, spacious brownness. Only Ariel and the roses and the lamp were clear, and a strange, small pain moved from Joe's heart to his throat as he thought that this ugly office, always before so harsh and grim and lonely—loneliest for him when it had been most crowded—was now transfigured into something very, very different from an office; that this place where he sat, with a lamp and flowers on a desk between him and a woman who called him "my dear" must be like—like something that people called "home."

And then he leaned across the desk toward her as he said again what he had said a little while before, and his voice trembled:

"Ariel, is it you?"

She looked at him and smiled. "You'll be here always, won't you? You're not going away from Canaan again?"

For a moment it seemed that she had not heard him. Then her bright glance at him wavered and fell. She rose, turning slightly away from him, but not so far that he could not see the sudden agitation in her face.

"Ah," he cried, rising, too, "I don't want you to think I don't understand or that I meant I should ever ask you to stay here! I couldn't mean that. You know I couldn't, don't you? You know I understand that it's all just your beautiful friendliness, don't you?"

"It isn't beautiful; it's just me, Joe," she said. "It couldn't be any other way."

"It's enough that you should be here now," he went on bravely, his voice steady, though his hand shook. "Nothing so wonderful as your staying could ever actually happen. It's just a light coming into a dark room and out again. One day long ago, I never forgot it, some apple blossoms blew by me as I passed an orchard, and it's like that too. But, oh, my dear, when you go you'll leave a fragrance in my heart that will last!"

She turned toward him, her face suffused with a rosy light. "You'd rather have died than have said that to me once," she cried. "I'm glad you're weak enough now to confess it!"

He sank down again into his chair, and his arms fell heavily on the desk. "Confess it!" he cried despairingly. "And you don't deny that you're going away again—so it's true! I wish I hadn't realized it so soon. I think I'd rather have tried to fool myself about it a little longer!"

"Joe," she cried in a voice of great pain, "you mustn't feel like that! How do you know I'm going away again? Why should I want the old house put in order unless I mean to stay? And if I went you know that I could never change. You know how I've always cared for you!"

"Yes," he said, "I do know how. It was always the same, and it always will be, won't it?"

"I've shown that," she returned quickly.

"Yes. You say I know how you've cared for me, and I do. I know how. It's just in one certain way—Jonathan and David!"

"Isn't that a pretty good way, Joe?"

"Never fear that I don't understand!" He got to his feet again and looked at her steadily.

"Thank you, Joe." She wiped sudden tears from her eyes.

"Don't you be sorry for me," he said. "Do you think that 'passing the love of women' isn't enough for me?"

"No," she answered humbly. "I'll have people at work on the old house tomorrow," he began. "And for the—"

"I've kept you so long!" she interrupted, helped to a meek sort of gaiety by his matter of fact tone. "Good night, Joe." She gave him her hand. "I don't want you to come with me. It isn't very late, and this is Canaan."

"I want to come with you, however," he said, picking up his hat. "You can't go alone."

"But you are so tired, you!"

She was interrupted. There were muffled, flying footsteps on the stairs, and a shabby little man ran furtively into the room, shut the door behind him and set his back against it. His face was mottled like a colored map,

thick lines of perspiration shining across the splottches.

"Joe," he panted, "I've got Nashville good, and he's got me good too. I got to clear out. He's fixed me good, but he won't trouble nobody!"

Joe was across the room like a flying shadow.

"Quiet!" His voice rang like a shot, and on the instant his hand fell sharply across the speaker's mouth. "In there, Happy!"

He threw an arm across the little man's shoulders and swung him toward the door of the other room.

Happy Fear looked up from beneath the down bent brim of his black slouch hat. His eyes followed an imperious gesture toward Ariel, gave her a brief, ghastly stare and stumbled into the inner chamber.

"Wait!" Joe said cavalierly to Ariel. He went in quickly after Mr. Fear and closed the door.

This was Joseph Loudon, attorney at law. And to Ariel it was like a new face seen in a flashlight—not at all the face of Joe. The sense of his strangeness, his unfamiliarity in this electrical aspect, overcame her. She was possessed by astonishment. Did she know him so well after all? The strange client had burst in, shaken beyond belief with some passion unknown to her, but Joe, alert and masterful beyond denial, had controlled him instantly; had swept him into the other room as with a broom. Could it be that Joe sometimes did other things in the same sweeping fashion?

She heard a match struck in the next room and the voices of the two men—Joe's, then the other's, the latter at first broken and protestive, but soon rising shrilly. She could hear only fragments. Once she heard the client cry, almost scream, "Joe, I thought Claudine had chased him around there to do me!" And instantly followed Loudon's voice:

"Steady, Happy, steady!"

The name "Claudine" startled her, and, although she had had no comprehension of the argot of Happy Fear, the sense of a mysterious catastrophe oppressed her. She was sure

that something horrible had happened. She went to the window, touched the shade, which disappeared upward immediately, and lifted the sash. The front of a square building in the courtyard square was bright with lights, and figures were passing in and out of the main street doors. She remembered that this was the jail.

"Claudine!" The voice of the husband of Claudine was like the voice of one lamenting over Jerusalem.

"Steady, Happy, steady!"

"But, Joe, if they get me, what'll she do? She can't hold her job no longer—not after this."

The door opened, and the two men came out, Joe with his hand on the other's shoulder. The splottches had gone from Happy's face, leaving it an even, deathly white. He did not glance toward Ariel. He gazed far beyond all that was about him, and suddenly she was aware of a great tragedy. The little man's chin trembled, and he swallowed painfully.

Nevertheless he bore himself upright and dauntlessly as the two walked slowly to the door, like men taking part in some fateful ceremony. Joe stopped upon the landing at the head of the stairs, but Happy Fear went on, clumping heavily down the steps.

"It's all right, Happy," said Joe. "It's better for you to go alone. Don't you worry. I'll see you through. It will be all right."

"Just as you say, Joe," a breaking voice came back from the foot of the steps—"just as you say."

The lawyer turned from the landing and went rapidly to the window beside Ariel. Together they watched the shabby little figure cross the street below, and she felt an infinite pathos gathering about it as it passed for a moment, hesitating, underneath the arc lamp at the corner. They saw the white face lifted as Happy Fear gave one last look about him; then he set his shoulders sturdily and steadfastly entered the door of the jail.

Joe took a deep breath. "Now we'll go," he said. "I must be quick."

"What was it?" she asked tremulously as they reached the street. "Can you tell me?"

"Nothing; just an old story."

He had not offered her his arm, but walked on hurriedly a pace ahead of her, though she came as rapidly as she could. She put her hand rather timidly on his sleeve, and without need of more words from her he understood her insistence.

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"That was the husband of the woman who told you her story," he said. "Perhaps it would shock you less if I told you now than if you heard it tomorrow, as you will. He's just shot the other man."

"Killed him?" she gasped.

"Yes," he answered. "He wanted to run away, but I wouldn't let him. He has my word that I'll clear him, and I made him give himself up."

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN Joe left Ariel at Judge Pike's gate she lingered there, her elbows upon the uppermost crossbar, like a village

girl at twilight, watching his thin figure vanish into the heavy shadow of the maples, then emerge momentarily ghost gray and rapid at the lighted crossing down the street, to disappear again under the trees beyond, followed a second later by a brownish streak as the mongrel heeled after him. When they had passed the second corner she could no longer be certain of them, although the street was straight, with flat, draftsmenlike western directness, both figures and Joe's quick footsteps merging with the night. Still she did not turn to go, did not alter her position nor cease to gaze down the dim street. Few lights shone, almost all the windows of the houses were darkened, and save for the summer murmurs, the faint creak of upper branches and the infinitesimal voices of insects in the grass there was silence—the pleasant and somnolent hush, swathed in which that part of Canaan crosses to the far side of the eleventh hour.