The Story of a Nameless Hero's Sacrifice and of a Love That Would Not Be Sacrificed

GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN

(A Complete Novel Each Week in The Evening World)

By Frank L. Packard

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Varge, a foundling has been reared and educated by Dr. and Mrs. Merton of Berley Falls; whom he loves as though they were his own parents. Harold Merton, their son, murders Dr. Merton in a fit of rage, and persuades Varge to assume the blame for the crime. This Varge does, that Mrs. Merton may not know her only son is a murderer. He surrenders to justice and refuses to say a word in his own defense. He is sentenced to a life term in the penitentiary. The Warden's daughter, Janet Rand, feels a strange interest in the new prisoner. Harold Merton meets Janet and falls in love with her. He proposes to her. She rejects him, but he continues to call on her. For his share in quelling a prison mutiny Varge is made a "trusty" and is set to work in the Warden's garden. There he meets Janet and a friendship springs up between them. Varge learns to love her. He cannot bear to be near her, every day; loving her hopelessly and having her see him as a convict. So he escapes. Making his way to Gloucester, he boards a fishing schooner. The schooner is wrecked in a gale, off the Maine coast.

CHAPTER XVIII.

(Continued.)

"My Name Is Peters."

SLOWLY it grew lighter, slowly the eastern gray spread and crept higher. Still Varge's eyes held shoreward. A dark speck showed on the foaming crest of a wave—and disappeared. It showed again—nearer—nearer.

A hoarse cheer went up from a dozen throats. Grotesque figures in oilskins with cork belts tied around their bodies were bobbing up and down, now above, now below him, as the lifeboat rose and fell.

He swung Jonah Sully out to them, poised himself on the rail—and at their shout dropped into the boat.

"Any more?"—they had passed him along to the stern sheets and it was a bearded, grizzled form at the tiller that howled the question in his ear.

Varge shook his head. "There are no more," he said.

Once more only during the passage shorewards did the lifeboat's captain speak to him.

"What's her name an' your names?" he asked. "How many of the crew gone?"

"Mary K. Jones of Gloucester," Varge answered him. "This is Capt. Sully. My name is Peters. Four of the crew were washed overboard a little after midnight."

They lifted Jonah Sully and carried him up the beach. A throng of men and women crowded about the crew, the boat and Varge—the men cheering, the women anxious faced.

Quietly Varge drew a little to one side, watching them place the lifeboat on its truck. Some one spoke to him, a woman's voice—and mad, wild fire leaped through his veins.

"I am sure you should not stand here," she said. "You need dry things at once and something hot—to"——

They were staring into each other's faces—to hers rushed a crimson flood—to his there came the whiteness of death.

Neither spoke. Then Varge looked away.

"I have told them my name was Peters," he said simply—and waited.

Her hand touched his arm. The blue eyes looked full into his.

"Your name is Peters," said Janet Rand.

A hearty smack fell across his back. "Come along with us, matey," cried the captain of the crew, "an' we'll have you tucked up in a jiffy snug as a bug in a rug."

CHAPTER XIX.

On the Brink.

THERE was no mystery in Janet Rand's presence in the Maine fishing village. She often went there in summer to visit her aunt, who lived there. Soon after Varge's escape she had started on her annual trip to the coast.

An hour after her encounter with Varge on the beach she had come to the coast guard station with a quaint, elderly little lady, her aunt, ostensibly to bring jellies and various delicacies for the invalided Jonah Sully, and professing, at least, great surprise to find the skipper of the Mary K. Jones sitting on the doorsteps discoursing volubly to a group of fishermen upon the incidents of the storm, and showing little evidence of the precarious condition he had been in the night before, except for a bandage that swathed the crown of his head and precluded the use of any other headgear.

"In an hour on the beach at the foot of the pathway, half a mile further along the cliff," Janet had found occasion to whisper to Varge quickly.

And now he was waiting for her.

She came presently, but he did not hear her until she was close behind him—he had been looking the other way, his eyes fastened intently on the path by which he himself had descended, and the slight sound of her steps in the sand had been drowned by the noise of the surf.

She held out both her hands in frank, unaffected greeting, as he turned to face her, but there was a strange shyness in her voice.

"I came by the beach," she said. "I thought it would be safer."

He caught her hands in his—and then he could only stand there and look at her and search her eyes. A little dark-cloaked figure she was, the hood drawn over her head, the wind blowing truant hairs of gold across her face. So small, so dainty, so trim, so fresh and pure and beautiful—oh! to sweep her into his arms and hold her there, to have her arms creep around his neck, her head to find its place upon his shoulder—through all of life!

The blood swept in waving tides to her cheeks; her eyes, lowered, sought the ground, and she gently disengaged her hands.

He stood a little back from her then. A glint of the setting sun, through a break in the flying clouds, came from across the range of tossing waters and seemed to single him out, throwing into relief against the background of the cliffs the great strong figure, clothed in the dark shirt and belted trousers which the coastguard men had furnished him. The loose flannel shirt, low at the neck with its turn-down collar, hid nothing of the splendid breadth of shoulder that seemed so proudly glad to poise the well-set, shapely head.

The weeks in the woods had bronzed and tanned his face, the dark hair had lost its hideous shortness and was beginning to wave a little now—the beauty of clean-lived young manhood in all its rugged power was dominant in every feature.

His eyes were on the surf—hers had lifted and were studying him. She had tried to picture him without the prison stripes—how little, how crudely she had succeeded!

With a quick intake of her breath, she spoke again, hurriedly now, as though brought suddenly to a realization of the present.

"Oh," she said, "there is so much to say—and there is so little time."

"Time?" he echoed mechanically—and looked at her.

She nodded. "Yes. Let us go over there beyond those rocks"—pointing with her hand—"away from the path here. Some one is liable to come down at any time."

She started forward as she spoke, and Varge followed her. She sat down upon the sand, her back against a boulder. He took his place before her, full length upon the beach—she, facing the rolling surf; he, the line of cliffs that seemed to stretch away for miles on either hand.

"Time?" he said again.

"Yes," she said. "You must go away from here at once—to-night. I would have tried to warn you earlier, but I thought the rest you needed after last night was worth the risk of a little delay. I am expecting father. I came down here, you know, after the fire to spend a few weeks with my aunt, and he promised to take a little holiday himself while I was here."

"But he has not come yet?" Varge asked quietly.

"No; not yet—not that I know of," she answered. "He said he was coming to-day or to-morrow, but he did not know just when he could get away."

"The trains," said Varge, "what time do they arrive? The evening train"——

"There are no trains here," she interrupted quickly. "You have to drive nearly seven miles to the nearest station, and I do not know just when they arrive."

Varge allowed a handful of sand to trickle through his fingers before he spoke again.

"I have not thanked you for what you have done," he said finally, in a low voice. "You had only to speak a word and I—I suppose there is a jail even in this little place?"

"They call it a lock-up here," she corrected, with a queer little catch in her voice.

"Yes," he said gravely. "And now you have taken the additional risk of coming to warn me. I had no right to force a further false position upon you—I should have gone at once."

She put out her hand swiftly, impulsively, to rest upon his sleeve.

"You must not speak like that," she said, her lips quivering. "It—it hurts me. It is as though you—oh, I do not know quite how to say it—as though you admitted to yourself the possibility that I would, or could, have done anything else, when I am so very glad, so very thankful that I could do even the little thing. Oh, Varge, you speak of thanks and I—what can I say to you?—my life, Dr. Kreelmar told me what you did—how brave you were and"——

"And did he tell you that he had to be kept by force from going for you himself?" Varge interposed, smiling at her and shaking his head. "You see, after all, it was only that I was a little the stronger."

"No," she said slowly. "No; he did not tell me that—dear old Dr. Kreelmar." Then, looking straight at Varge: "But should that make me any the less—the less grateful to you?"

"I have taken unfair advantage of it," he said, evading her question. "I had no right to force to-day upon you. Yes; I should have gone last night, but I"—he hesitated—"I couldn't, I"——

He rose to his feet, walked abruptly a few yards away and stood facing the sea. The wind was grateful, whipping his fevered brow; there seemed something akin in the storm-tossed sea to the tempest raging in his own soul. His lips moved for a moment silently; then he turned, went back and stood before her. She was still seated as he had left her—as though she had not moved.

"I am a convicted murderer"—the words came from him with cold, deliberate steadiness, and it was as though he drew a line upon the sand at her feet between them, across which there was no passing—"I am under sentence for life. I am an escaped convict."

A little cry came from her, as quickly she gained her feet and stood there facing him, her hands clasped suddenly together. She seemed to shiver a little.

"Why—oh, why did you say that!" she faltered.

"Because," he answered monotonously, "sometimes I have dared to forget it—and I must not forget."

"You are an innocent man!" she cried, in a strained voice. "You deny it—but I know."

"You are very good," he said softly, but he did not look at her. High up above him on the cliff a figure stood suddenly silhouetted against the skyline. He dropped his eyes after an instant's glance that she might not notice that anything had attracted his attention.

She stepped to him quickly and raised her face to his. "Is there nothing—nothing in all the world," she breathed in passionate earnestness, "no promise of happiness for the future, no single thing that the future might hold in store for you, no dream that might come true, that will make you speak, that"——

Gray to the lips, his face full of the agony he could not hide, he broke in hoarsely upon her words.

"Miss Rand, be merciful!"

"I am merciful," she said tensely. "Be merciful to yourself. I shall never try to make you speak again, but for this once"——

AKIN TO STORM TOSSED SEA.

"You do not know what you are saying," he said desperately.

"—— But for this once," she went on resolutely, "I must not let you put me off. It—it was one of the things I came for. I honor you for what I believe you have taken upon yourself—I think it was one of the finest acts a man has ever done—but it is terrible. It is for all your life. If you are not caught, you must always be a fugitive. See, I am pleading with you as if—as if I were fighting for my own happiness—for the last time."

"The last time?" he repeated numbly. He raised his eyes to the cliff again—the figure far above them was still silhouetted against the skyline.

"Yes; for the last time," she said after him. "I must go in a moment, and—and to-night you must leave here to"——

"It is time," said Varge—the figure on the skyline was moving back now, disappearing from view.

"Then you will speak"—— She was very close to him, her breath was on his cheek, her lips were trembling, her eyes, tear-dimmed, were raised to his.

Speak! Yes! Why not—and grasp at his chance for happiness! To stand a free man, his future before him, to work for her, to win her in the days to come! He had only to speak and let the coward soul he was shielding—no, it was not that—strange that for the moment he should have forgotten! It came to him now, bringing peace, strengthening him, calling him—the gentle, patient face of Mrs. Merton, the silvery hair so smoothly parted beneath the old-lace cap, and the eyes of trust looked into his again now as they had looked through all his boyhood—and the dear lips smiled at him. He turned his head from Janet—and shook it silently.

Her voice broke. "It—it must always be—like this?"

It was a long time before he spoke.

"Always," he said. It was but a single word, low spoken, but it was his doom, his sentence, self-pronounced.

She drew back from him, a smile struggling bravely for supremacy on the quivering lips.

"You will go—you must go to-night, at once—before father comes."

"I will go at once," he said.

"Good-by," she whispered—and held out her hand.

For a moment he held it in his own; then he bent his head and touched it with his lips.

"God guard and keep you and bring you happiness," he said, "through all your life."

He watched her go—watched long after the last flutter of her cloak was lost to view around a little headland of projecting rock far down the beach.

Slowly then Varge walked to the foot of the pathway leading to the cliff above, and slowly began to mount it.

Almost at the top of the cliff the path swerved sharply to the left. Varge made the turn—and stopped dead in his tracks. Two men leaped from behind the rocks that had hidden them—and blocked the path behind him. Warden Rand rose from a stone on which he had been seated and came forward; four other men, men of the coast-guard, their captain among them, appeared as if by magic from behind other rocks and clustered about him. Seven to one! A grim smile in which was blended a strange apathy settled on Varge's lips as he faced the warden.

"I am sorry for this, Varge," Warden Rand said gravely. "I had rather it had been any other man than I to trap you. As it is, I have force enough here to make resistance, even from you, but an act of folly."

CHAPTER XX.

The Allies.

"CAPTAIN! Captain Sully!" Out a little from the village on the cliff road leading to the coast-guard station Capt. Jonah Sully halted, turned around, and peered through the darkness at a figure that was hurrying after him.

"Be you callin' me?" he inquired; then, in recognition: "Oh, it's you, miss, be it? Evenin' to you—evenin'!"

Janet answered him in little gasps, out of breath from her run.

"I want your help"—Janet leaned forward and caught his arm.

"Help?" said Capt. Jonah Sully bewilderedly.

"To get Varge out of there," she said in a low, strained tone.

"Landsakes!" ejaculated the little skipper, stepping hastily back. "Be you mad? Why—why, it's agin the law!"

"He saved your life."

"Yes. Y-e-s, that's so."

"The cell is in the rear part of the townhall, in the basement," Janet explained, "and it has a separate door at the side. I passed there two or three times last week and I noticed that it was fastened with a heavy padlock. It ought not to take a man very long to file away the staples and get the outside door open. I do not know what kind of a cell it is, but I do not imagine it is very modern or formidable; and, anyway, once inside, Varge will help us. Besides the file, we'll need a good strong bar and a lantern."

"I'll get 'em—up to the coast-guard station," said Jonah Sully cheerfully. "You leave that to me. I'll get 'em."

"I'll meet you, then, at midnight."

Midnight came at last—how many times had she consulted her watch by the aid of a match! How terribly, how anxiously the time had dragged by! She put on her cloak, moved toward the door—and stopped. Money—Varge would need plenty! He would not take it from her, but he would not surely refuse it as a loan from Capt. Sully. She went to her dresser, found her purse, took out the bills that were in it and placed them in the pocket of her cloak. Then she crossed to the door, opened it and stood on the threshold listening.

All was silence, only her heart was beating wildly; it seemed almost as though she could hear it. She pressed her hand to her side and held it there a moment; then, closing the bedroom door noiselessly, she gathered up the skirts of her cloak and dress, crept down the stairs, made her way to the front door and out into the street.

It was intensely dark—a hurried glance about her showed her that not a light was burning in the village, only the boom of the surf seemed to fill the night.

She went quickly down the street. Five minutes brought her to the rendezvous, and she stopped before the church.

"Here I be," announced Jonah Sully, stepping out from the porch. "Ain't no one seen you up to the house, have they?"

"No," said Janet. "No—it's all right."

"An' I got it," declared Jonah Sully gleefully. "Yes; I reckon my luck's turned. Hooked it, by crickey!"

"You mean the file and bar and lantern?"—Janet nodded her head.

"More'n that," chuckled Capt. Sully. "Got the key for the padlock—hooked it from the cap'n of the coast guard—'pears he's kind of chief magistrate an' head of the fire department an' I dunno but some other things. Anyway, he had the keys an' I borrowed it outer his clothes on the way out. Might as well move along, hadn't we?"

"Just a minute"—Janet took the money from her cloak and held it toward him. "Here's a little money that I want you to make Varge take—as a loan from you, you understand?"

"Got my hands full," said the skipper; "lantern an' bars an' tools an' things we'll need once we get inside. Jest slip it into my pocket an I'll see he gets it."

"There it is, then," said Janet, putting the money into the side pocket of his coat. "Let me help you carry something."

"No," said he. "'Taint but a step—we'll be there in a jiffy."

"Come, then," said Janet quickly.

It was hardly a hundred yards away, a wooden building next to the church, and the last one on the road within the village proper. It took them scarcely a minute to reach it, and, passing along the side of the wall, Jonah Sully laid the things he was carrying upon the ground before the door and reached into his pocket for the key.

"Ain't no fear of us bein' heered, 'count of the surf," he observed. "An I dunno but that's just as well, 'cause mebbe we'll have to make some noise when we get inside."

"Yes, yes," breathed Janet—she was trembling a little, excitement and emotion growing upon her. "But hurry, hurry!"

There was a faint metallic click, the rubbing of metal against metal—and then the creak of the door swinging open.

"There you be!" exclaimed Capt. Jonah Sully triumphantly.

Janet stepped quickly forward.

"Varge!" she called in a low voice.

There was no answer.

"Varge!" she called again.

Still no answer.

"*Varge!*"—she was terrified now. Her heart seemed to sink and grow cold as though an icy hand were clutching at it—had they come too late—was he already on his way back to Hebron? She turned frantically to Jonah Sully. "The lantern—a light—quick!" she cried.

On his knees Jonah Sully lighted the lantern, stood up, flashed it around, and, jaw dropped, stared into Janet's white face. Then he leaned back against the wall and patted weakly at the top of his head.

"'Pears—'pears as if he'd—he'd gone," he gasped. "Jee-rooshey! Never see anything like that in all my born days. 'Tain't possible—not without dynamite." Capt. Jonah Sully's voice trailed off into an awe-struck whisper. "Jee-rooshey!" he said.

A tense, rigid little figure, motionless, Janet stood staring silently about her. It was a small, narrow place, cement-floored. Across one end, the one opposite the entrance, had been a cell of brick and cement, with a heavy door, iron-sheeted half-way up, iron-barred the rest of the way. This hung now in utter ruin, sagging out at an angle, held only by a half-broken hinge at the bottom. The centre and upper hinges had been torn from the walls and the bars of the door were forced outward as from an explosion. Brick and plaster, strewing the floor, adding to the effect of ruin and wreckage, completed the scene.

"There!" muttered the skipper helplessly, pointing to the single window just above his head, whose bars had been bent apart like pieces of wire. "There's where he went! Well, I swan! Couldn't have been dynamite 'cause he'd have blown himself to pieces." Capt. Sully pulled earnestly at his whiskers. "Well, I swan!" he said.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Greatest Thing.

IT was unconquerable. The very greatness, the bigness, of the man nourished it and fostered it until, beating down his defenses, routing him, it dominated and owned him. A strange paradox? No—rather the inevitable.

A foreshadowing of it had come to Varge on that night of wild turmoil when he had faced death, had momentarily expected it, on the storm-swept schooner's deck—but only a foreshadowing—he had not realized it all then.

It had been more than that since that evening on the beach when, for an instant, the mad thought had come to him that she, in all her glorious, fresh young innocence and beauty, in all her tender purity and sweetness, cared for him—a nameless man, an escaped convict, a branded felon. Yes; he had put it from him—then. Not easily—for then in all its meaning, in all its depth, as it had come to him before, had come the knowledge of the fulness, the completeness of his own love.

Since then, that was two months ago now, the days and weeks had passed as in a dream. He had gone from place to place, working, a little here, a little there, at whatever offered—then on again. Never but a few days at most in the same place—not so much from fear of capture, he felt strangely free and safe from that, but because of the restlessness of spirit that he could not quell, that grew ever stronger, more insistent, more constantly with him as the days went by.

Just to hear her voice, to see her face, her smile once more, to feel her presence near him—because he loved her.

Well, he had come! He had left the train at a station ten miles from Hebron, and since afternoon he had walked the rest of the distance. And now? If, after all, the pitiful chance and hope he clung to should be vain! It was so little that he asked—to steal a glimpse of her through the window of the sitting-room perhaps, to hear her laugh, her song float out to him through the night—that was all—just that—and then to go away again. It was so little to ask for, to hope for, the striving for so desperately hard that surely, surely that much would be his.

The night was calm and quiet. Across the fields in front of him the great walls of the penitentiary stood out in the black irregular lines in the white moonlight; twinkling lights from the houses dotted the village road; just before him he could distinguish in a dark blur the warden's lawn, the avenue of maples that fringed the driveway. He wondered, a little curiously, a little wistfully, what the house looked like now—the front, of course, would be the same for there the fire had hardly touched it; but the rear—had it been rebuilt just exactly as it was before, or was it changed?—not that it could matter, only it all seemed so intimately a part of her—and this was her home.

He reached the roadside, looked up and down it, listened—then suddenly lay down full length upon the grass. A step crunched on the gravel across the way, and a man turned into the road—it was Warden Rand—and started briskly off in the direction of the village away from the penitentiary. Varge waited until the warden was out of sight and hearing, then he crossed the road quickly, gained the shadows of the maples and, keeping on the edge of the lawn to deaden the sound of his steps, passed cautiously from tree to tree, making his way toward the house.

"Varge!"

It came in a cry—not a startled cry, but soft, broken, like a sudden sob, full of wonder, full of pathos, a naked cry robed in no studied dress, the cry of a soul, that halted him, chained him to the spot and robbed him of his strength.

"Varge!"

Something white showed behind the dark network of the Virginia creeper that trailed over the end of the veranda, a chair scraped and toppled over—and she was coming toward him down the veranda steps.

His hand rose slowly to his hat and he stood bareheaded as she came.

Softly, wondrously the moonlight played upon her, seeming to hold her in its embrace, lingering on the little white-shod feet, creeping so reverently around the graceful form, flooding the full throat, the sweet face, the golden hair with mellow radiance—glorying in its right to caress.

She stood before him now, so small, so delicate in her beauty, like some pure, God-given angel, and a fragrance as of some rare perfume was about her. The long lashes fell suddenly, hiding the great blue eyes, and her head was lowered, bowed a little.

"You have come, Varge"—the words came very slowly in an unsteady voice—"here where—where your danger is very terrible, and you have taken this frightful risk because, because—will you tell me why?"

A long, long time the silence held, and then she spoke again, her head a little lower.

"You—you are making it very hard for me," she whispered. "You will not answer and—and I know. I—I knew on the beach that day—did you think I did not know? It is so long ago, and—and I have prayed your prayer, the prayer you asked for me, since then—that God would guard and keep you—and I prayed that He would bring you back, but not like this—in peril for—for me."

"Janet!"—all of life and death seemed in the word; rapt wonder, a wild questioning that would not let him yet believe, was in his eyes, his face.

Slowly, hesitatingly, he put out his hands and touched her—her arms, her shoulders—and gently lifted her face and looked into the swimming eyes that for a breathless moment were raised to his—and then he swept her to him, kissing the blue-veined eyelids, the trembling lips, the golden head of hair, the pure white brow.

"I love you, I love you—Janet—Janet"—the words came over and over again from his lips—words he had never thought to say—came voicing a song of wondrous melody in his soul—all else was blotted from him—and only that glad paean of supernal joy rang out entrancing him.

"Varge—dear Varge," she answered him tremulously—and like a tired child lay passively in his arms.

He held her close to him in a silence that had no need of words, her head upon his breast, his face buried in the golden hair again—and then her hand stole into his and she led him towards the willow.

"I do not think we could be seen from the road," she said, a little laughter, a little sob mingling their notes in her voice, "but it will be safer here."

He faced her, pale, haggard, his eyes full of the misery that was upon him.

"Janet! Janet!"—grief, self-condemnation, hopelessness, all were in his voice; and wrung from him in a hoarse cry came the words that had flashed upon him when he had stepped out from the elm upon the lawn and she had seen him: "Janet—what have I done!"

Her hands felt up and rested upon his face.

"I know," she said softly. "But we could not undo that now if we would. I know—so well. You never meant that I should see you—but, oh, I am so glad, so glad I did. I have wanted you so and—and now you have come and—and I will never let you go again."

His fingers brushed back the hair from her forehead and smoothed it tenderly.

"I would to God," he said in a choked voice, "that it were so—that I should never leave you."

"I can never let you go," she said, and her hands pressed tightly on his cheeks. "I can never let you go—alone—for it would be—forever."

He drew her to him, drew her head to his shoulder again, holding her tightly, thinking to soothe her.

She held quite still for an instant; then she raised her head, and her eyes as they met his were blinded with tears, but there was brave centre and quiet resolve in her voice.

"I do not think you understand," she said steadily. "You must go soon—now—but not alone."

He looked at her startled, reading her eyes, searching her face.

"Janet!" he cried. "You mean—you mean that you will marry me, that when I go you"——

"Will go, too," she said resolutely.

With a strange, slow movement Varge shook his head.

"You do not know what you are saying," he said numbly. "I, who am convicted of a crime of which I cannot even tell you I am innocent; I, who"——

"My heart told me that long ago," she interrupted him. "I have thought of it since that morning in the garden here, since that afternoon on the beach—you could not tell me then, and I do not ask it now—I shall never ask it. If it is a sacrifice that involves other lives, as I know it must be, if it seals your lips so that you can never speak, at least it shall not take from us all happiness—the love that God has given us."

"My name"—his head was bowed, his voice dull. "Have you forgotten that I do not even know who I am—that I have no name but Varge—that I can never hope to find another?"

"Would it be a prouder one?" she said, a quiver in the full throat as she lifted her head. "A prouder name than Varge—just Varge—because you have made it what it is."

"You love me so?" he murmured brokenly.

"Is my love greater than yours that risked more than life to-night that for a few minutes you might be near me?" she asked, with a little sob. "Yes, I love you so. I do not know how great my love is, I only know that it is the greatest thing in my life—that you shall not go and face the terrible future that you are thinking of alone." She had drawn closer to him, and now her arms had crept around his neck and tightened there.

"No, no!" he burst out desperately. "I cannot—I must not!"

"Yes," she said passionately. "You must—there is no other way. You could not live alone through those years, they would be too terrible, too cruel—but together we will make another future for ourselves somewhere—and you will be happy—and it is my happiness too—we will find happiness together. I—I think that I should die if you left me here."

Find happiness! Make another future for themselves! It was like a glimpse of Heaven! Happiness—ah, yes, there would be happiness—and his life had been clean—if there was a stain upon his name there was none upon his soul—and it was God-given, this pure love of theirs, as she had said—and there was no other way—the barriers were down, torn down, through no voluntary will of his—nothing could change that now—and they were each other's—for all of life.

"Listen, Varge"—her arms still clung around his neck, but her face was raised to his. "The time is going and it is precious—every minute is so precious to us now—we must not lose a single one. You know the bridge over the creek? You must go there by the fields. I have a few things I must get together, but it will take you longer going that way than it will take me by the road. I will meet you there, and a little further on there is some one I can trust who will give us a horse and buggy, and we can drive to Claxton and get a train. Oh, Varge, Varge, did you think that I would let you go alone! That I"——

She was crushed in his arms, his lips to hers, to her hair, to her eyes again—and again in his soul burst forth that deathless song of glad, wondrous joy, and now its melody was carried in high, exultant notes, like crashing strains of martial music that fired his blood—and he was immortal, a god, and power and majesty and might and heaven and earth were his.

"Yes!" he whispered fiercely. "Yes, yes—yes!"

She freed herself, half-laughing, half-crying, the blue eyes smiling at him through a blinding mist; then breathlessly, pantingly, she pushed him away.

"Go, then!" she pleaded. "Oh, go at once—quick! I will be there before you are—and we have no time to lose."

She turned from him and ran toward the house. For a moment the little white figure paused on the veranda steps and looked back at him—and then she was gone.

The song in his soul rose into higher, wilder, almost barbaric chords—the primal, elemental song that may slumber sometimes but never dies. Quickly he passed across the lawn, down the driveway, over the road and gained the fields. Bathed in the white, clear moonlight, fairy carpeted they seemed, giving a new lightness, a new spring to his steps, as though they, too, heard the song and would speed him on his way.

Then came reaction and sanity. Horrible sanity. And his path lay, clear, before him. He must save her—from herself. At a run he set out for the prison.

In a few minutes he had reached his goal. He seized the gate bell and wrenched at it violently.

And now a hurried step sounded from the hall within, then sliding bolts, the rattle of a steel key—and the door, still held by a chain lock, was opened a cautious inch or so.

"What's wanted?" demanded a gruff voice.

"Open the door"—Varge's voice was strained, low, a whisper—he pushed desperately against the door. "Open the door—let me in."

"Here now, none of that!" growled the guard roughly. "Keep your hands off the door! Let you in, eh? And who the devil are you?"

Varge leaned suddenly a little further forward, and, thrusting both hands into the opening, grasped at the edge of the door—it seemed that he must literally hold himself, cling to something, something tangible that responded to his sense of touch—mind and soul were in turmoil—the bridge, the bridge, she was waiting for him—calling to him from there—his fingers tightened on the door until it seemed that the blood must spurt from the nail tips to keep that voice from dragging them from their holds.

"Let me in!" he cried out hoarsely. "Let me in! I am Varge. I am Seven-seventy-seven."

It was dark there in the shadow of the doorway, and there was a vicious, threatening note in the guard's tones.

"Yes—like hell you are!" he snapped. "Go on, now—beat it! None of your funny joker business, or I'll let you in in a way you won't like! D'ye hear, beat it or"——

Varge was upon the door like a madman—a wild shout from the guard echoed back through the hallway and rang, reverberating, through the high, vaulted dome of the prison beyond.

In—he must beat his way in—tear his way in—now—another instant and he would turn and flee—in—in—IN! With all his Titanic strength he heaved against the door, and his muscles, leaping into play, hardened like knobs of steel.

For an instant there in the darkness there was no sound save of great breathing, while a form, curiously contorted into crouched shape bulked black against the doorway—then again, and once again, the guard's shout of alarm, full of a sudden terror now, rang out in a high-pitched yell. Came then a low, ominous noise of yielding things, steel and iron and wood—then the chain-lock, torn from its socket, clattered jangling against the steel door—the door shot wide and brought up against the wall with a terrific crash, hurling the guard on the other side to the floor—and Varge, resistance suddenly gone, pitched forward, recovered himself, and staggered into the hallway.

Shouts and cries were everywhere now—the stillness of the prison, that at night was the stillness of the tomb, was gone—guards, on the run, dashed through the steel-barred gates from the prison proper into the hall. Panting, gasping, his face white with the fearful strain, great drops standing out upon his forehead and trickling courses down his face, Varge leaned heavily against the wall.

The door-guard gained his feet, and his jaw dropped, stared like one looking at a ghost into Varge's face.

"Seven-seventy-seven!" he mumbled. And again: "Seven-seventy-seven!"

There was a smile, grim, ironical, on Varge's lips, as the other guards surrounded him—the door-guard had rushed back to the door and was frantically closing it, shooting home the bolts, nervously, hurriedly turning the great steel key!

CHAPTER XXII.

Breaking Into Prison.

WARDEN RAND groped in the darkness for the lamp on the table, as, followed by Dr. Kreelmar, he entered the sitting room of his home.

"Guess Janet must have gone for a walk," said he. "Get a match, Kreelmar?"

Dr. Kreelmar produced the match, lighted it and handed it to the Warden.

"Give you a bishop and a pawn to-night," volunteered the Warden offhandedly, but chuckling inwardly at himself as he removed the lamp chimney. "Beat you too easily last time."

"You'll do what?" snapped the irascible little doctor, who was a very keen chess player and quite, if not more than, the equal of the Warden.

"Bishop and pawn," repeated the Warden composedly, replacing the chimney and adjusting the wick with emphasized deliberation. "Get the board and the men—you know where they are—on top of the bookcase. I'll be back in a moment—left my cigars upstairs"—and he hurried from the room.

With a snort, the doctor crossed to the bookcase, jerked the board and the box of chessmen from the top, and returned to the table. He slapped the board open, dumped the boxful of men over it, and began to sort out the black and white pieces—carefully setting up the white ones with which he was to play. This done, as he heard the Warden's steps returning, he reached over, very grimly possessed himself of a black bishop and a black pawn and slipped them into his pocket. He was profoundly engrossed in seeing that the white pieces were exactly in the middle of the squares when the Warden spoke from the doorway.

"Kreelmar!"

There was a hollowness, a dull weariness in the other's voice that caught the little doctor's ear instantly. He raised his eyes from the chessboard — and the next moment had jumped to his feet, sending the pieces of chessmen flying in all directions.

"Eh? What! What!" he spluttered out. "Good Lord, Rand, what's the matter?"

The Warden was standing in the doorway, his face set and white, a sheet of notepaper in his hand.

"Kreelmar—Janet's gone!"

"Gone!" gasped Kreelmar. "Gone! Gone! Gone where? What do you mean? Gone where?"

"I don't know," the Warden answered hoarsely. He came across the room toward the doctor. "I found this upstairs on the dresser. Read it, Kreelmar—read it."

(To Be Continued.)

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