

THE NEW COMMANDMENT BY ANTHONY VERRALL

The story of a Kentucky feud hatred transplanted in a desert oasis, where a man and a woman, turned primitive by necessity, come at last to love as intensely as they had hated.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS. John Ghent and Judith, hunter and the wife of a slain man, have left their homes in the mountains of Kentucky...

CHAPTER X. Discoveries.

Ghent arose at dawn to resume the work upon his arrows. At 6 o'clock he had feathered four. Half an hour later he had slain that same unfrightened old grouse that Judith had pursued without avail.

He spent considerable time in a fruitless search for his matches before he finally thought of a singular deposit of obsidian, over which he had passed on his way to this oasis.

Reasoning that anything so hard and flint-like would render up a spark at a stroke from the steel of his knife, he clambered up the steep ascent past the ledge of rock and over the table-land and down its farther declivity till he came to the glittering belt of stuff from a piece of which he hoped to conjure fire.

When at length Ghent came upon a large rounded "button" of clear obsidian he was forcibly struck by its resemblance to a magnifying lens. As conversant as Judith had been with the functions of a burning-glass, he tried excitedly to procure a focus of the sun's hot rays through this natural substance, so nearly formed for the purpose, but without results.

He searched the place in a fever of desire. The glare of it mocked him. The heat that was already rising made him dizzy and faint. He began to suffer thirst again, especially at the memory of those hours of his toiling in these barren hills. With his energies bent upon the task of finding a piece of this stuff that might be chipped to a lens, he suddenly remembered his watch, an old-fashioned timepiece bulging a pocket of his trousers.

In a wild impatience he pried up the crystal with the blade of his knife, and turning it quickly to the sun, held his hand below it and moved it up and down to find the focus. A great disk of light shone clear on his skin till he drew it down smaller and smaller, until the rays all fell in a concentrated spot of brilliance as small as a freckle—and Ghent swung his hand out, satisfactorily burned, and shouted aloud in delight.

Eager for nothing but to hasten to camp, make a fire, and roast his breakfast, he determined he could reach his camp by a roundabout way involving less climbing of the slopes. The route he chose was longer than he had imagined. It took him far around the base of the table land, and so, at length, to an upper division of the great ravine in which the spring had its rise.

He recognized the fact that this was a branch of the larger canyon, and followed it down at a rapid pace till he came upon a great dike of porphyry fully as large as a house. He walked beneath the shadow of this mass of rock, looking up it in wonder till he found himself halted at its base by an extraordinary spectacle.

Hollowed in the bulk of the yawning, cliff-like ledge was a blacked-out cave or recess, fully ten feet deep, and quite as wide. On a rude sort of table made of rocks, against one of its walls, inside, lay something that glittered in the light. Out on the gravel at the mouth of the cavern lay two of the most utterly gruesome objects John Ghent had ever beheld—the skeletons of a pair of human beings, bleached to dazzling whiteness in the glare, the skulls of both split open.

The men had been dead so long that no bones remained upon their naked bones—nothing save some clinging of thick-soiled boots, now warped and shriveled to now suggestions of what they once had been. He looked about the cavern inquiringly and presently discovered a third frail skeleton—that of a rife.

an old-fashioned muzzle-loading weapon, the ramrod of which had wanted to a wisp of woolly fiber. When Ghent took the gun in his hands the stock fell away and the lock lay with it in the sand.

His gaze returned to the table that the cave's two occupants had made of stone within the shelter. The shining object that lay upon it attracted his attention. It was gold—a large golden nugget, untarnished, still mockingly bright, and fashioned by nature with a hole through its mass, as if it symbolized the circle and the hollowness of life. He took up the nugget, but cast it down again, a bitter smile playing on his lips.

The quick, sharp scrutiny to which the visitor's attention was caught by a round, dark object, hidden by the shadow of a rough projection of stone. He stepped closer and found it was an old canteen, still covered with rotted felt.

Believing to find an article so essential to his needs against the day when he should make an attempt to escape from the desert, Ghent started out more for his fort. With the rusted barrel of the rifle and the well-preserved canteen in his possession, he went on his way down the ravine, deeply sobered by what he had beheld.

CHAPTER XI. The Savage Passion.

Judith spent that day in devising and fashioning means for the capture of game. She set to work on the cordage. The snare that she finally finished was crude and useless, but, unaware of its deficiencies, she carried it down to the thicket where quail must sometimes travel, and there she secured it between two clumps of shrubbery, trusting to capture something soon. A noise to hang a rabbit eluded all the efforts of her mind, either at memory or invention. She postponed its manufacture in favor of a rude sort of drop.

Thoughts of the stout wicker car of the wrecked balloon had prompted her ingenuity in this simple craft. She went to the thickest growth of the willows, and breaking out an armful of long, slender branches, took them to the shade and wove a large, flat mat, like a section from the bottom of the basket left stranded on the desert. It was a stout piece of work, nearly three feet square when she had finished.

She next provided a stiff piece of willow a foot in length with a long cord tied to its centre, and then, with a number of heavy stones that she readily gathered, she was ready to proceed. What quail she had seen had been running about the harsh-looking mountain bushes that grew above their greener neighbors. On these she discovered small, dark seeds, a quantity of which she gathered to strew upon the sand for her lure.

Having selected a spot well tracked by the feet of the small brown birds, she fetched her trap to the place. The mat she had woven was placed, bearing several stones upon its top, with one edge resting on the ground, while under the opposite edge she stowed her foot long stick with the cord attached to its centre in such a manner that it propped and supported the weight of the loaded fall.

Her intention was to sit concealed away, with the farther end of the cord in her hand, to wait till the unsuspecting quail should gather beneath the trap at their eager feeding. Then she would jerk away the prop and down would come the fall, made deadly by the weight of rocks upon it. It was a long and wearisome vigil to which she was compelled by her desperate hunger. All the long, hot hours of the early afternoon she sat in her hiding place alertly watching for prey.

When at length the shadows began to lean eastward from the declivity of the sun she heard the comfortable little sounds of a covey of quail feeding slowly along the slope. Her breath came quickly as a number of the restlessly darting little fowls appeared by the side of her trap. Three of them fed with avidity upon the seeds she had scattered on the ground. Then, as she leaned tensely forward, the cord in her hand drawn taut, a pair of the birds moved unexpectantly beneath the loaded mat.

With a sharp exclamation on her lips Judith jerked out the prop, and instantly leaping to her feet ran to the place and had the wild satisfaction of beholding one of the helpless quail pinned flatly to the earth. The others had flown in alarm. In her eager haste she snatched up the mat to clutch her prize. The bird had been mortally hurt, with a wing bone snapped and its back cut and bruised, yet it scrambled to its feet, its instinct for life still strong upon it, and darted away toward the cover. Judith sped after it instantly. It

Life's Little "Ifs"

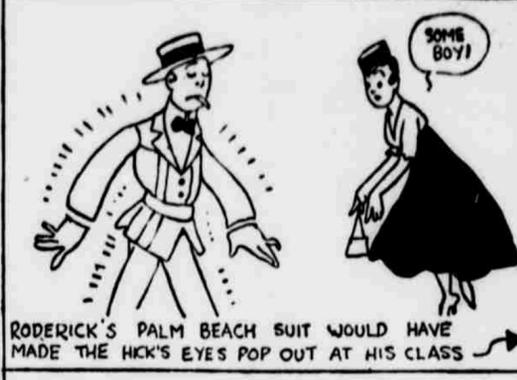
By Jack Callahan



YES, AND THEY'D STILL BE THE SAME OL' PALS



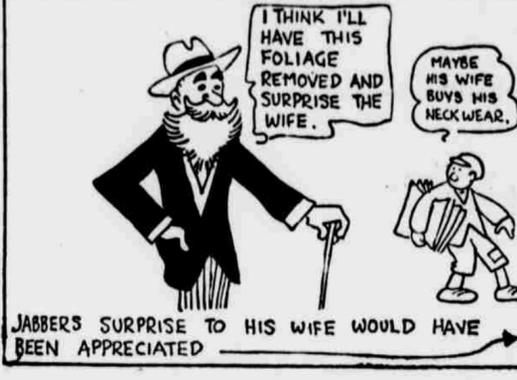
PETE HADN'T GOT TOO FRIENDLY AND SLAPPED MIKE ON HIS BACK!!



RODERICK'S PALM BEACH SUIT WOULD HAVE MADE THE HICK'S EYES POP OUT AT HIS CLASS



IF MUD HADN'T BEEN SO PLENTIFUL!



JABBERS SURPRISE TO HIS WIFE WOULD HAVE BEEN APPRECIATED



IF IT HADN'T RENDERED HER UNCONSCIOUS

ran down the hill to the shaded oasis. As savagely as a famished tiger the woman flung herself forward on the earth to catch it in her hand. She released it, and rose to dash on again, tearing her clothing on the brush as she ran and keeping her eyes upon the wounded bird relentlessly.

It halted in the thickness of a bunch of willows. She pounced upon it with animal ferocity, crushing the steel to roughly prepared handles, after which she was ready to begin the task of grinding the blades to practical keenness.

While she labored thus, creating and devising at her cave, Ghent had been scarcely less active. His determination to escape from the desert had been tremendously augmented by his recent discoveries. The thought of the two bleached skeletons, lying suggestively near, persistently haunted his dreams. Possession of a sound canteen for carrying water made an exploration of the desert possible.

Impatience coursed in his veins, yet the man was wise in his sense of the dangers with which the desolation abounded. Of these, starvation was the first. He could make no attempt to leave this strip of life and greenery till he could slay and prepare a number of birds or rabbits, to be carried, like his can of water, against the demands of his body.

Meantime, he had never been anything but hungry, night or day, and between himself and Judith was waged a silent competition for the living creatures on which they must both of them prey. Some of Judith's contrivances he found in the runways of the animals. What success she had achieved in killing meat for food he could not know. For himself, he had whittled new arrows, since his bow was still his only weapon, and upon them he depended wholly for supplies.

Thus went the days in the canyon. Judith continued to be far more starved than Ghent. Despite her snares, traps, pits and sling, her means of securing food were far less certain than the man's. Time after time she was driven to return to her first crude deadfall, which she watched for half-days at a time.

All day, when not otherwise engaged, she labored with mind and hands to produce new engines of destruction with which she must wage a battle for life against the helpless denizens, birds, animals and snakes, whose world was the limited oasis.

Ghent, only barely less hungry than Judith, and even more active and

aggressive, had become an apparition of animal ferocity. His clothing, like hers, was tattered. Like Judith, he was hatless. His hat had become an ugly stubble that failed to conceal the scar upon his jaw. His eyes glittered sharply and aggressively. He was thinner. The look of the famished was upon him.

When he and Judith met at the spring or in pursuit of creatures of the brush, never a word passed between them. They faced each other for a moment in unabated hatred that was daily increased rather than diminished by the pangs of living to which they had both been reduced. By tacit agreement, Ghent remained almost exclusively in possession of the upper half of the oasis, while to Judith fell the lower extent of the narrow realm of greenery—the slender bridge of life.

Out of sheer necessity, Judith had constructed or gathered more appliances than Ghent. Beyond his shelter and his bow and arrows, he had made himself nothing at all. Judith, at the end of a period of feverish employment, had accumulated an astonishing number of properties.

Ghent had scorned all thought of provision save that of sufficient food to assure his escape. As if at last the gods of chance smiled benignly on his enterprise, he had the singular good fortune to kill three quail and a grouse on an evening when Judith finally completed and set the most skillfully contrived of all her traps.

He therefore determined to delay no longer, but to make a particular effort toward securing another brace of birds at dawn, and with all his meat and his can of water to leave the place forever—and Judith to her fate.

CHAPTER XIII. The Land of the Lifeless.

UP and silently haunting the greenery with bow in hand, before the day had fairly broken the following morning, Ghent roved from one end to the other of the canyon's growth without securing so much as a shot. Impatient and half determined to start upon his migration with the same grouse and quail that would still remain after eating his breakfast, he presently emerged from one of the thickets and discovered Judith's latest trap, with two live quail beneath it, striving vainly to escape.

He glanced about. She was not in sight. Desperation had intensified the

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The summit of the range and was looking down upon a rugged valley, earth, and with all his head and a portion of his body thus protected from the glare, he lay perching at its feet.

CHAPTER XIV. The City of Dreams.

OR nearly an hour Ghent remained at the foot of the yucca. By then the sun was so nearly perpendicular above it that the shade had diminished to a half. He arose, in every direction the ghost-like forms were moving in that silent, stealthy manner, each one promising a larger patch of shade and protection than the other. Seeking the shade of one after another, and slipping a little fluid from his hot canteen, Ghent lay at length, exhausted and all but ready for death, beneath the shade that a fragment of rock, as if in pity, cast from the western sky.

It was not until the sun went down that he rose and continued on his chosen course. Until nine o'clock he moved straight northward, as before. Having then arrived, in the darkness, space a hundred yards before him, he was suddenly out of the pass, upon a gentle slope, with a vast plain spread flatly for miles.

No sooner had he seen it than a sound of gladness broke from his lips. Down the slope, and looming above the stunted brush that grew upon the desolate land, was apparently the figure of a man, who was slowly moving backward and forward in the glare. Too far away to be signaled, the figure could nevertheless be overtaken. Ghent started toward it in a fever of joy and excitement.

Presently he halted. The figure was hardly two hundred yards away. It had now become singularly still. Puzzled, and beginning to feel some sickening doubt, Ghent went onward, stumbling a trifle in his eagerness and panting with heat and breathlessness.

It must be a man! It had to be a man! But fifty yards from the thing that had lured him down the slope he was ready to sink in disappointment to the earth.

It was merely a cactus plant, grotesquely like the figure of a man. The dancing air of the desert had seemed to impart the motions of life to its form.

Ghent did not approach it nearer. The truth had jarred upon him with a shock. In the heat and dancing of the air he had need to pause and make an effort to remember what it was he had been striving to achieve when the vision of this desert companion had been thrust upon him. Yes—he remembered—he had been hastening northward, out of this hideous desert. He started again, his desperate hope to reach some haven of men and open farms.

From time to time he sipped from his can of tepid water. A mile further on he came to a shelving terrace in the valley, above a lower floor. Down in that sunken depression the air took on a newer, more fantastic manner of dancing, and the land was populous with cacti, near and far, that resembled human beings. All of them moved. All were terribly silent.

Ghent felt that they would drive him mad. He was mocked as no man had ever been mocked before. They were not to be ignored. As he moved, so they moved. When he halted, they moved less certainly, but some appeared to turn about, or to sway in their tracks, or to change their positions while his eyes were turned away. He knew they were grisly yucca plants—mere Joshua trees—like the one he had approached, yet they took on such motions and looks of life that his own crazed impulse was to run from one to another of the parched, forbidding things, crying for companionship and guidance.

With all his strength of will he forged northward, more alone than before, in all this grisly company. A thought that those behind were pursuing him began, at length, to haunt his mind. A hundred times he turned abruptly about and faced the ghosts that appeared to dog his trail.

He went on. He cursed the Joshua trees, doomed forever to this dance of death, to which they would faintly enter him. He was strong; he had water and meat; he would keep his course and come upon human habitations. Yet there came an hour when the heat was no longer supportable. With a brain on fire and senses reeling drunkenly, amid all the quivering of the air, he staggered ahead till he knew he could go no more.

Something in one of the yuccas off to the left abruptly suggested his father, gone to his long eternity. Like a helpless child the man stumbled weakly through the stunted brush, making for the form. As he came there it staided, ceasing to move, then developed in all its desert ugliness, a stiff, bare thing, as little like a parent as a galloway. Nevertheless, Ghent threw himself down on the scorching sand where the post-like

He winked, and still another city was created in the blue, imposed upon that which was wrong side up. The groan he might have uttered died away in his throat from his weakness. He knew it at last—this city of dreams—the empty mirage that beckons his kind to their doom! (To Be Continued)

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