

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.

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SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS. John Ghent and Judith Haines are the survivors of two Kentucky families who, by trying a long and sanguinary feud, have left the survivors of their race in the heart of the desert. Not having any more children, John and Judith, consequently station at a great distance in a Western city, and themselves the only passengers in a motor bus. A storm cuts off the bus and leaves it for some time in the desert, where it is at last seen to earth with both passengers unconscious. They find a small cave, and here begin a strange life for the time. They are bound to primitive means of cooking food by peering upon the bird and eat the life of the oasis and to fashion the rude implements and articles necessary to their existence. John discovers a way in which two million years before had vanished after starting out. The hot sun was and makes life in the oasis almost unendurable. Both animal and vegetable life is able to flourish. John decides to try creating the desert to such human habitations. Nearly ruined by heat and privation he prevails the escape of a "Pony" in the desert.

CHAPTER XIV.

(Continued.) The City of Dreams.

A SICKENING sense of his helplessness gave way to a greater emotion in Ghent's stubborn being. He would not give up! He would not die in this open hell! He would live and defy the very fates! It meant going back—all the long way back to the mountain oasis—back to the spring, the struggle—and to Judith Haines!

He laughed aloud, in a terrible manner and started dizzily southward, facing the quivering desert he had travelled.

How he staggered at noon to the scant protection of a friendly shelf of rock he could never have told. How long he lay there, panting and barely retaining his sanity, concerned him not in the slightest degree. As much by instinct as by design, he arose, toward sundown, and staggered off southward doggedly—bound home.

He walked till nearly midnight. By then he had topped the range of hills he had scaled at dawn going northward.

Ghent gazed across the mighty land from the rocky summit where he made his bed and fancied he could just discern the great V cleft in the range so far to the southward—the range of the green oasis. While he looked a lustrous star burned in glory down in the very angle of the V. For a moment he thought it must be Judith's camp-fire, glowing in the night—a beacon light of comfort and of home. Then he knew it was not. He sank into dreamless sleep, and the mighty procession of the spheres, working out the destinies of planets, suns and moons, swung westward in the desert realms of space.

CHAPTER XV.

The Acme of Loneliness.

JUDITH HAINES, left to herself in the mountain strip of greenery, had undergone many sensations when at the end of her first day of absolute solitude the twilight found her wrapped in reflections before her open cave. Just before sunset she had slain a rabbit with her sling. Her traps were set. Her grim scheme of living had abated not a jot of its fierceness.

Nevertheless, the night brought on a poignant realization of all that it meant to be living here alone, abandoned by the other human being with whom she had come to the desert.

How it would seem on the morrow, and after a week, and after a month had passed she could not even faintly conjecture. That such an enforced isolation must soon become terrible she could have no doubt. The thought of living on and on, slaying the birds and beasts for no being of her kind, degenerating rapidly into a savage female hermit—this was but faintly suggested to her mind, for she shunned the prospect far dead.

All that day she had roamed the small green theatre of life, hungry, unkempt and disturbed. When at length she retired within her cave that night she had no thought of fear. She heard the howl of some prowling coyote that came here to hunt. He hunted in silence, and finding her trap, wherein a belated quail had been captured at dusk, killed the bird and robbed the trap, devouring his victim on the spot.

In the morning a second of Judith's engines of capture had performed its functions, slaying a grouse. She had meant in abundance. She breakfasted heartily for once, and set her traps anew, discovering the feathers left on the ground where the lone coyote had

watched at his feast.

The second long day of Ghent's absence had commenced. Judith had scrutinized his camp from a distance on emerging from her cave. When her breakfast was finished she proceeded up the gorge and looked again upon the shelter Ghent had made. She felt he would never return.

Not far long, however, could Judith remain here in idleness. Dressed again soon, and bothered again by the uncontrolled strands of her hair, especially those which trailed down her forehead and into her eyes, she tore a twig from a willow, wound her front locks upon it, and suddenly conceived a plan for ridding herself of these tresses entirely. She could burn them off.

The operation, with Judith, was a brief affair. Returning to her cave, she blew upon certain of the scolding embers of her breakfast-fire, and thus secured a number of twigs glowing hot for an inch or so of their length. With two of these kept alive in her hand she hastened once more to the spring, in one still pool of which she had previously seen her face reflected.

It was the work of a moment only to catch up the stray, flying strands that annoyed her so constantly and wind them tightly on a stick. Thus held in a firm, tidy manner close up to her scalp, the locks were ready for the brand. She caught up one of the twigs with red fire aglow upon its end, leaned out again over the mirroring pool of water, and drawing the hot coal straight along the twig on which her hair was rolled, burned it off in a clean straight line as neatly as a barber could have cut it.

She climbed the slope and, proceeding to the shelter, stood with folded arms disdaintfully looking it over. There lay the cordage he had fetched from the valley, and there lay his bow, unstrung, with a number of arrows beside it. The ashes of his former fires lay in a small gray heap, at the edge of which were bones half burned and greasy. For a moment she thought of taking the bow, for which she felt certain she could readily fashion additional arrows.

Then a scorn for anything and everything that a Ghent had made or handled brought a hard compression on her lips and a light of contempt for her eyes. The things could all lie here and rot! When she needed a bow she would make one.

She turned to the spring. A certain sense of freedom stole upon her, especially now that Ghent's shelter had been visited. There could be no restraint upon her actions. She was all alone. The trip of greenery was hers; the spring, the sunlight—everything was hers. She stripped off her clothing and bathed in the water that trickled down its channel, and tried to comb it with her fingers. It was hopelessly tangled. Yet, despite its condition, it was a glorious mantle to her shoulders. She was superb—a natural creature in a natural environment.

Against the hunger that returned once more with the waning of the day there was a fresh captive in the traps she had visited. She went to her hungry—and once again the downy crop of the night banded all her spirit of dominion, all her sense of ownership and freedom in the strip, and in its place came the thoughts of her utter loneliness in the desolation sanctified to silence.

That this sense of her isolation would tend to increase upon her daily she was made aware on the following morning when again she gazed across the gorge to Ghent's rude shelter in the rocks and beheld it still untenanted.

A hundred times she went to the spring that day, and as often returned to her cave. Her work could not fasten her attention. She made no confession to herself that John Ghent was on her mind, troubling her unaccountably; she would not admit that she wished him back, much as she must hate him should he come; nevertheless, it was not for the water that she climbed the gorge so many times, nor to make an inspection of her traps.

There was nothing to tell her that out in the glare of the valley, to the north, a half-crazed man was staggering painfully home, nevertheless, she wandered back and forth at random. The sun went down at length upon the blistered world of rock and mountain. Once again, at dusk, as she had so many times in all afternoon, she ascended the silent ravine to a point in the alders from which she could look straight downward at the spring. There was nothing there.

About to turn and leave the place, she started abruptly and strained a little forward, her breath coming short and rapidly, for no earthly reason that she knew. A moment later one of the clumps of willows above the spring of water swayed as if some heavy weight had swept against it. Then Ghent reeled weakly into sight—a terrible figure, spent, all but mad, ghastly, with swollen

Your Vacation

By Jack Callahan



lips and bulging eyes, his stubble-bearded face a mask of agony—always with that sinister scowl upon his jaw.

The man fell forward on the earth and crawled to the water. He drank but a sip, then rolled upon his back and lay there motionless, staring at the sky.

Judith had felt her heart give one great bound—she knew not what. She did not care to know. Until nearly midnight she watched through the darkness of the mountain gorge before she sought her bed of grass. But never a sign of the man came home did the darkness surrender to her view.

Ghent had expended his last frantic spasm of strength to reach the spring. He slept on the earth beside the pool, where Judith had seen him flounder down.

CHAPTER XVI.

A Savage Partnership.

FOR JUDITH, the return of Ghent bore more than one significance when once again she awoke to the ever-relentless needs of life on the following day.

The first and most important fact adduced was this—there could be no escape from the desert. Since he, a strong man, had attempted the labor and failed, it meant that the trackless desolation must extend all about them for leagues. They were doomed, they two, together to remain here, battling for existence till the fates should release them, perchance by death itself.

Meantime, as always, however, she must live—and her hunger was ravenous. She was early abroad in the greenery making inspection of her traps. The first sight she caught of Ghent, at surprise, aroused all the passions of her lifelong hatred against him. In his weakened condition, and with a memory of what he had found on the morning of his departure from the gorge, he had come once more to Judith's trap—and there she beheld him rob her of a grouse.

She snatched the bird savagely, with no thought of compunction, obeying only the instincts of self-preservation. Still exhausted, half-famished, and aware of his physical incapacity for hunting and slaying for his needs, he took this meat as a panther might have taken it, and with equal readiness to fight for its possession, if necessary, as far as his weakness would permit.

With blazing eyes Judith watched him. She made no movement. Her presence was not detected. With the bird in hand, and tearing its skin and feathers from it as he walked, Ghent went at once to his shelter, built him a fire, and resumed his dominion of half of the green oasis. Fortunately, a large, fat ground

squirrel, the first that she had captured, had been caught and banded by one of the nooses which Judith had set in the runways. She found it while her rage was still upon her, and was somewhat mollified. Nevertheless, resentment burned in her bosom with every thought of Ghent's descent upon her trap, and some fierce determination to retaliate, or to beat him with her hammer, should he ever repeat the robbery, urged all morning in her blood.

For Ghent, the day became, perforce, a time of rest and recuperation. He lay hour after hour by the spring, breathing the cooler air that played above the water and sleeping away the physical fatigue and mental agonies to which for three days he had been subjected.

By evening the man was considerably restored. He was once more hungry; he was willing, however, to shoot or capture something for himself before he should once more eat. With a thought of his bow, which he knew was still lying on the gravel at his camp, his reflection strayed to Judith in a strangely eager manner.

For a second some haunting fear, echoed from his terrible experiences out on the desert, possessed his mind. She might have gone in his absence—and the woman, though forever of the hated tribe of Haines, was nevertheless a human being.

Heretofore too weak and dizzied to remember anything, he now forgot them, his weapons, and every bodily need in the almost childish demand of his underlying nature to behold a fellow creature of his kind. He climbed the slope toward his shelter. Judith's cave was presently in sight, but his eyes could discern no Judith at its mouth. Down the slope, and down through the greenery, he hastened, past the line that he mentally acknowledged divided her region from his own, and at length came upon her, working to cut out some willows with one of her curved-steel knives.

He halted too far away to surprise her at her labors. She had neither heard nor seen him. He remained for a moment only. The part of his nature that was savage aroused his old hatred of a Haines. Then he heard the distant whistle of a quail, and returned to his camp for his weapons.

During the week that followed Ghent's return, the round of existence for the pair of agonized and isolated beings settled down to one endless tale of hunger and desperate

pursuit of lesser creatures. In the silent warfare waged against every edible creature alive in this slender strip of green, the animals still surviving evolved new suspicions, new cautions, new fears. They avoided old runways, they sought the spring at unaccustomed hours, they fled from the near approach of either the man or woman, in terror of their lives.

Thus, with every succeeding day the task of procuring food became more difficult, especially for Judith. She seldom killed anything with her sling, while Ghent, with his bow, became a deadly marksman. She redoubled her efforts to acquire a need skill, for her traps were becoming less and less reliable.

The creatures of the strip had almost disappeared. They had been devoured. The grouse, easy victims of Ghent's barbed shafts, had been the first to suffer extermination; the quail were vanishing rapidly. Numbers of the squirrels had succumbed to Judith's developing skill with her sling. Not a few of the rabbits had abandoned their burrows to creep much farther down the gorge and dig away.

Both Judith and Ghent discovered this, and followed relentlessly. Judith became aware of another important fact. The rabbits that ran even out of the green boundaries and into the rock heaps below the oasis, where the two perpendicular walls formed a natural gate at its lower extremity, invariably back-tracked and returned, as if unwilling to go far around or to remain for long away from cover. Therefore it was that she spent all one morning in fetching and piling slabs of stone to form a barrier across the gorge between the walls at its sides.

Her plan was to make the place a cut-off into which she could drive the helpless cottontails for slaughter. The space between the last green growth and her wall she cleared of every brush and stone that could shelter the smallest of her victims.

The place, crudely finished but self-explanatory, was found by Ghent on an early excursion down the gorge at the heels of a rabbit. He gazed upon it approvingly. It would help them both. Nevertheless, the particular potential he had hoped to shoot had slipped through the wall where a tiny chink that seemed far too small for its uses had offered escape from the man.

He put down his weapons and worked till dark supplementing all that Judith had accomplished, filling the chinks with smaller stones and adding to the height of all the barrier.

At sunrise the following morning Judith and Ghent, each independently of the other, went down the ravine toward the newly built barrier, frightening three rabbits before them. Before they came to the open space between the greenery and the wall they beheld each other, and exchanged a glance which, while it blazed with undiminished enmity, nevertheless conveyed a sort of understanding, such as two wild coyotes might exchange.

Judith had come with her sling and a club. Ghent was armed with bow and arrows. They skulked the three rabbits simultaneously—and both of them missed.

In the blindness of their fear, baffled, as they were, by the wall of stone, two of the cottontails ran toward Judith, as if to escape before her very feet. Ghent had notched another arrow, but he could not shoot in the rapid manoeuvre of the rabbits. He was forced to watch them, and by heating it on a bed of coals forced it open and shook out a handful of rich brown nuts, thin of shell and delicious to taste.

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Daily the pool of water at the spring was diminishing. There came a noon when there was less than a quart of water in the hole. That seepage robbed the pool by subterranean processes Ghent was thoroughly convinced. He knew he must come there at dusk to dig in the earth and follow the sinking water to a deeper source.

All afternoon in his darkened shelter he labored with his knife, sharpening sticks for drills and a shovel with which to perform the work of excavating at the hole. He lashed a number of stout willow stakes, thus sharpened, to cross pieces, forming a scoop. To the whole he lashed a substantial handle. Other pieces he merely prepared for loosening the earth and roots of plants, for the digging would be no easy task.

At sundown he carried his implements to the drying well, and stood there gazing at the all but vanished pool. His digging, he knew, would so disturb and roll the water that a drink would be out of the question for hours. Nevertheless, it was work he could not neglect. Even since noon the supply had visibly diminished. While he paused to take one last long draft, Judith came walking up her well trod trail, bearing her hollowed-out stone, in which she was wont to carry water. Ghent turned about and beheld her. In silence they exchanged a long, questioning glance.

Beholding the tools that Ghent had made, Judith was immediately apprised of his intention. The man, for his part, divining the use to which her receptacle could be put, stood to permit her to fill it, before operations should commence. She, therefore, filled it carefully, exhausting the spring's deepest cavity in the process. Not much more than half a cupful of water remained in the hole and none flowed in to replenish the supply.

Judith retired, returning to her cave. On one of the smooth, flat rocks at her feet lay a score of the dried and broken acorns. She took up a kernel and ate it. To her surprise and delight it had lost not a little of its bitterness; it was crisp, nut-like and agreeable to her palate. She ate half a dozen. Then she stopped to consider a new idea.

It occurred to her that the hard, dry

meat could be ground or pounded into bits, which, mixed with water and low much less every day seeped downward to sink in the gravel. It was Judith who thought of the first expedient to protect the hole from the heat. She cut and brought bundles of willows to thrust in the sand and tied down and wove to form a shelter, since the growth about the spring was insufficient to cast a shade throughout the day.

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BEGINS IN NEXT MONDAY'S EVENING WORLD

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When, wearied to exhaustion by the heat and labor, she retired from the place, Ghent came, as he had done before, and finished the shelter at the well. He did it merely in a spirit of self-preservation. The partnership between himself and Judith was no more cordial than before. The feud still lived between them. The work they accomplished together was part of their grim scheme of life, and nothing more.

With alarming abruptness the spring began again to fall. In vain the man and woman heaped the freshest obtainable leaves upon the shelter. The heat from dawn to dusk was terrible. All the oasis was parching. Alders and willows lost their foliage prematurely, especially those below and above the fount of precious water.

The sun beat down upon the rocky sides of the canyon with merciless directness. The world of mountains sweltered. The air was dizzily vibrating, hour after hour. No quail were whistling in the brush; the squirrels had disappeared; a very few rabbits remained, and they were supernaturally timid. Man and God together had made the oasis almost a lifeless desolation.

Judith, meantime, despairing of meat, had discovered that the acorns were ripening. The manzanita berries also were red and rapidly drying. They contained a white mealy substance, decidedly sweet and undoubtedly nourishing. She gathered a quantity in the torn, wretched folds of her skirt and munched at them hungrily.

The acorns continued to be bitter and apparently useless. Nevertheless, she gathered several handfuls and broke them open on a stone. They lay in the sun before her cave, and presently dried as hard as grains of corn.

They were hungry almost constantly—desperately hungry. It was not in the least uncommon for either to go without meat for two or three days at a time. Ghent too, had discovered the manzanita berries. The acorns he had not essayed to sample. He cut a cone from one of the stunted pines, however, and by heating it on a bed of coals forced it open and shook out a handful of rich brown nuts, thin of shell and delicious to taste.

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