

SATAN SANDERSON.

Chapter 16

FROM the moment her kiss fell upon the forehead of the delicious man in the cabin Jessica began to be a prey to new emotions, the significance of which she did not comprehend. That kiss, she told herself that night, had been given to her dead ideal that had lain there in its purifying grave clothes of forgetfulness. Yet it burned on her lips, as that other kiss in a darkened room had burned afterward, but with a sense of pleasure, not of hurt. It took her back into crimson meadows with her lost girlhood and its opiate outlook—and Hugh.

But largest of all in her mind next day was anxiety. She must know how he fared. In the open daylight she could not approach the cabin, but she reflected that the doctor had been there and no doubt had carried some report of him to the town. So as the morning grew she rode down the mountain ostensibly to get the cherry cordial she had left behind her the day before, really to satisfy her hunger for news.

As it happened Mrs. Halloran's first greeting set her anxiety at rest. Prendergast had bought some tobacco at the general store an hour before while she had been making her daily order, and the storekeeper had questioned him. To an interested audience he had told of the finding of Hugh on the mountain road in a sort of crazy fever and enlarged upon the part the girl on horseback had played. Hugh was all right now, he said, except that he didn't remember him or the cabin or Smoky Mountain.

What Prendergast had said Mrs. Halloran told Jessica in a breath. Before she finished she found that Jessica had not heard of the incident in the saloon which had precipitated the fight with Devin, and with sympathetic rhetoric Mrs. Halloran told this too.

"Why does Smoky Mountain hate him so? What has he done?" asked Jessica.

Mrs. Halloran shook her head. "I never knew anything myself," she said judiciously. "I reckon the town folks counted him just a general low down. The rest is only suspicion and give the dog a bad name."

There had been comfort for Jessica in this interview. Mrs. Halloran's story had materially increased the poignant force of her pity. What had seemed to her a vulgar brawl had been in reality a courageous and unselfish championship of a defenseless outcast. Thinking of this, the self blame and contrition which she had felt when she listened to the violin assailed her anew, till she seemed a very part of the guilt, an equal sinner by omission.

Yet she rode homeward that day with almost a light heart.

As Harry stood in the cabin doorway looking after Prendergast toward the town, glistening far below in the morning sunlight, he thought bitterly of his reception there.

"They all know me," he thought. "Every one knew me on the street, in the hotel. They know me for what I have been to them. Yet to me it is all a blank. What shameful deeds have I done?" He shrank from memory now.

"What was I doing so far away, where was I going, on the night when I was picked up beside the railroad track? I may be a drunkard," he said to himself. "No, in the past month I have drunk hard, but not for the taste of the liquor. I may be a gambler, I may be a cheat, a thief. Yet how is it possible for bad deeds to be blotted out and leave no trace? Actions breed habit if they do not spring from it, and habit automatically repeated becomes character. I feel no inherent propensity to rob or defraud. Shall I? Will these things come back to me if my memory does?"

In the battle that he fought now he turned, even in his weakness, to manual labor, striving to dull his thought with mechanical movement. He cleaned and put to rights both rooms and sorted their litter of odds and ends. But at times the inclination to escape became well nigh insupportable. When the conflict was fiercest, he would think of a girl's face once seen, and the thought would restrain him. Who was she? Why had her look pierced through him? In that hateful career that seemed so curiously alien could she have had a part?

He did not know that she of whom he wondered in the litterest of those hours had been very near him; that on her way up the mountain she had stolen down to the Knob to look through the parted bushes to the cabin with the blue spiral rising from its chimney.

Though the homely task to which he turned failed to allay his struggle by



"The rest is only suspicion." At nightfall Harry had put the warring elements under. When Prendergast returned at supper time, the candle was lighted in its wall box, the dented tea kettle was singing over a crackling fire and Harry was perspiring over the scouring of the last utensil.

Prendergast looked the orderly interior over on the threshold with a contemptuous amusement. "Almost thought I was in church," he said. He took off his coat and lazily watched the other cook the frugal evening meal.

"Excuse me not volunteering," he observed. "You do it so nicely I'm almost afraid you'll have another attack that forgettery of yours and go back to the old line."

Presently he looked at the bunk, clean and springy with fresh out spruce shoots. He went into it, knelt down and thrust an arm into the empty space beneath it. He got up hastily.

"What have you done with that?" he demanded, with an angry snarl.

"With what?" Harry turned his head as he set two tin plates on the bare table.

"With what was under here."

"There was nothing there but an old orange skin," said Harry. "It is hanging a side of the cabin."

With an oath Prendergast flung open the door and went outside. He re-entered quickly with the white hide in his arms, wrapped it in a blanket and thrust it back under the bunk.

"Has any one been here today since you put it out there?" he asked quickly.

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Prendergast chuckled. The chuckle grew to a guffaw, and he sat down, slipping his thigh. Presently he went to the wall, took the chamois skin bag from its hiding place and poured some of its yellow contents into his palm. "That's why. Do you remember that, eh?"

Harry looked at it. "Gold dust," he said. "I seem to recall that. I am going to begin work in the trench tomorrow. There should be more where that came from."

Prendergast poured the gold back into the bag with a smiling look. The other had asked for no share of it. At that moment he decided to say nothing of the evening before, of the girl or the horseback journey, lest Hugh, eudging his brains, might remember he had been offered a half.

"There's plenty more where that came from, all right," he said, "and I'll teach you again how to get it one of these days."

Prendergast said little during the meal. When the table was cleared he lit his pipe and took from a shelf a board covered with beaded figures

and scrutinized it. "Hope you remember how to play old sledge?" he said.

Harry did not move. As they ate he had been wondering how long he could abide that sinister presence. As he was about to speak a knock came at the cabin door, and Prendergast opened it.

The visitor Harry recognized instantly. It was the man who had called for fair play at the fight before the saloon, who had drawn him into the hotel.

Felder carried a bundle under his arm. He nodded curiously to Prendergast and addressed himself to Harry.

"I am the bearer of a gift from some one in the town," he said. "I have been asked to deliver this to you." He put the bundle into the other's hands.

Harry drew up one of the chairs hastily. "Please sit down," he said courteously. He looked at the bundle curiously. "Et eos dona ferentes," he said stowly. "A gift from some one in the town?"

A deep surprise flashed into the lawyer's glance. "The quotation is classic," he said. "It was his express wish that I give the violin to you."

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Rising, he held out his hand. "Good night," he said. "I hope your memory will soon return. The town is much interested in your case."

The flush grew deeper in Harry's cheek, though he saw there was nothing ironical in the remark. "I scarcely hope so much," he replied. "I am learning that forgetfulness has its advantages."

Harry had colored painfully as Felder began to speak. His voice was unsteady as he answered:

"I appreciate it, I am deeply grateful, but it is quite impossible that I accept it from him."

"You need not hesitate," said the lawyer. "Old Despair needs it no longer. He died last night in Devil's dance hall, where he played when he was sober enough for his lodging. It happened to be near by, and I assure

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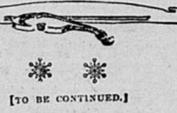
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