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LAHOMA BY JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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(Continued from last week.)

SYNOPSIS.

Brick Willock, highwayman, saves one Gledware and a baby girl from being murdered by his fellow outlaws on the western plains.

Willock flees to the mountains and hides to escape the wrath of the outlaws he had outwitted. He learns that some one has discovered his hiding place.

Red Feather, an Indian chief, brings Willock a little white girl, named Lahoma, and instructs him to take care of her. He says her father is living with Indians.

Willock recognizes her as the daughter of a woman who had died and was buried near by. He begins to teach Lahoma correct English.

The girl is taken across country by Willock to visit Bill Atkins, and later she makes her first trip to a real town.

A young man, Wilfred Compton, visiting at a ranch, gets an accidental glimpse of Lahoma and becomes interested in her. The girl is now fifteen years old.

Compton afterward visits Willock and is finally allowed to meet and talk with Lahoma. They become vastly entertained by one another's company.

Compton leaves and goes to another section of the country as a pioneer, where he hopes to make his fortune. Willock and Atkins join forces. Compton later returns.

Lahoma is sent to a city to get education and training. Compton is heartbroken at not being able to see her. Red Feather appears on the scene once more.

Lahoma writes a long letter. One of the men she meets is Gledware, her stepfather, but she does not know of the relationship. He is a crook of the lowest type.

Lahoma sends a warning to Willock that Red Kimball, one of the outlaws with whom Willock formerly operated, has sworn to kill him and has started on his way to do so. She adds that Gledware is in dread of something the Indian, Red Feather, may do to him.

Red Feather attacks Gledware and almost kills him. Lahoma learns that Gledware has married the Indian's daughter and deserted her. Wilfred Compton joins Lahoma and escorts her in a stagecoach to Willock's home.

Red Kimball and the remnant of the old outlaw gang are seen by Lahoma and Wilfred on their way to kill Willock. A terrific storm, a Texas norther, overtakes Lahoma and Wilfred.

Kimball and two other men are killed. Willock is under suspicion and a warrant is issued. Gledware will testify against Willock on an old charge.

The citizens are enraged at Willock, believing him to be a murderer. A mob gathers. Lahoma makes a speech in a desperate effort to save him from arrest. She describes his worthy deeds.

Willock, who has evaded the authorities, decides that he will go and confront Gledware. He was desperate at the thought that the crook would testify against him after he had years back saved the lives of Lahoma and Gledware.

To Willock's feverish imagination, the warrant became personified; a mysterious force, not to be destroyed by material means; it was not only paper, but spirit. And it had come between him and Lahoma. It had shut him off from the possibility of a peaceful old age. The cove was no longer home but a hiding place.

He did not question the justice of this sequel to his earlier life. No doubt deeds of long ago, never punished, demanded a sacrifice. He hated the agents of this justice not so much because they threatened his liberty, his life, as because they stepped in between himself and Lahoma. Always a man of expedients, he now sought some way of frustrating justice, and naturally his plans took the color of violence. Denied the savage joy of killing Red Kimball—and he would have killed him with as little compunction as if he had been a wolf—his thoughts turned toward Gledware.

Gledware was the only witness of the deed for which the warrant demanded his arrest. Willock wished many of his other deeds had been prompted by impulses as generous as those which had led to Kansas Kimball's death. Perhaps it was the irony of justice that he should be threatened by the one act of bloodshed which had saved Lahoma's life. If he must be hanged or imprisoned because he had not, like the rest of the band, given himself up for official pardon it was as well to suffer from one deed as from another. But it would be better still, as in the past, to escape all consequences. Without Gledware they could prove nothing.

Would Gledware testify now that Red Kimball, who had bought his testimony with the death of the Indian, no longer lived to exact payment? Willock felt sure he would. In the first place, Gledware had placed himself on record as a witness, hence could hardly retreat; in the second place, he would doubtless be anxious to rid himself of the danger of ever meeting Willock, whom his conscience must have caused him to hate with the hatred of the man who wrongs his benefactor.

Willock transferred all his rage against the dead enemy to the living. He reminded himself how Gledware had caused the death of Red Feather, not in the heat of fury or in blind terror, but in cold blooded bargaining. He meditated on Gledware's attitude toward Lahoma. He thought nothing good of him, he magnified the evil.

That scene at the grave of his wife and Red Feather's account of how he had dug up the body for a mere pin of pearl and onyx—ought such a creature to live to condemn him, to bring sorrow on the stepdaughter he had basely refused to acknowledge?

To wait for the coming of the witness would be to lose an opportunity that might never recur. Willock would go to him. In doing so, he would not only take Gledware by surprise, but would leave the only neighborhood in which search would be made for himself. Thus it came about that while the environs of the cove were being minutely examined Brick, riding his fastest pony, was on the way to Kansas City.

He reached Kansas City without unusual incident, where he was accepted naturally as a product of the west. Had his appearance been twice as uncouth, twice as wild, it would have accorded all the better with western superstitions that prevailed in this city, fast forgetting that it had been a western outpost. At the hotel, whose situation he knew from Lahoma's letters, he learned that Gledware was neither there, nor at his home in the country. The country house was closed up and, in fact, there was a rumor that it was sold, or was about to be sold. One of the porters happened to know that Gledware had gone for a week's diversion down in the Ozarks. There were a lake, a clubhouse, a dancing hall, as yet unopened. The season was too early for the usual crowd at Ozark lodge, but the warm wave that nearly always came at this time of year had prompted a sudden outing party which might last, no longer than the warm wave.

CHAPTER XIX. Mine Enemy!

WILLOCK took the first train south and rode with the car window up—the outside breath was the breath of balmy summer though the trees stood bleak and leafless against the sky. Two days ago, snow had fallen—but the birds did not remember it. Seven hours brought him to a lonely wagon trail called Ozark lodge, because after winding among hills several miles it at last reached the clubhouse of that name overlooking the lake. He left the train in the dusk of evening, and walked briskly away, the only moving figure in the wilderness.

His pace did not slacken till a gleam of fallen sky cupped in night fringe warned him that the clubhouse must be near. A turn of a hill brought it into view, the windows not yet aglow. Nearer at hand was the boathouse, seemingly deserted. But as Willock, now grown wary, crept forward among the post oaks and blackjacks, well screened from observation by chink-pink masses of gray interlocked net work, he discovered two figures near the platform edging the lake. Neither was the one he sought, but from their being there—they were Edgerton Compton and Annabel he knew Gledware could not be far away.

"No," Annabel was saying decisively, and yet with an accent of regret. "No, Edgerton, I can't."

"But our last boat ride," he urged. "Don't refuse me the last ride—a ride to think about all my life. I'm going away tomorrow at noon, as I promised. But early in the morning."

"I have promised him," she said with lingering sadness in her voice. "So I must go with him. He has already engaged the boatman. He'll be here at 7 waiting for me. So you see—"

"Annabel, I shall be here at 7 also!" he exclaimed impetuously.

"But why? I must go with him, Edgerton. You see that."

"Then I shall row alone."

"Why would you add to my unhappiness?" she pleaded.

"I shall be here at 7," he returned grimly. "While you and he take your morning boat ride I shall row alone."

She turned from him with a sigh, and he followed her dejectedly up the path toward the clubhouse. She had lost some of the fresh beauty which she had brought to the cove, and her step was no longer elastic; but this Willock did not notice. He gave little heed to their tones, their gestures, their looks in which love sought a thin disguise wherein it might show itself unnamed. He had seized on the vital fact that in the morning Annabel and Gledware would push off from the boat house steps, presumably alone, and it would be early morning. Perhaps Gledware would come first to the boat house, there to wait for Annabel. In that case he would not ride with Annabel. The lake was deep—deep as Willock's hate.

Willock passed the night in the woods, sometimes walking against time among the hills, sometimes seated on the ground brooding. The night was without breath, without coolness. Occasionally he climbed a rounded elevation from which the clubhouse was discernible. No lights twinkled among the barren trees. All in that wilderness seemed asleep save himself. The myriad insects that sing through the

spring and summer months had not yet found their voices; there was no trill of frogs, not even the hooting of an owl—no sound but his own breathing.

At break of dawn he crept into the boathouse like a shadow, barefooted, bareheaded—the clubhouse was not yet awake. He looked about the barnlike room for a hiding place. Walls, floor, ceilings were bare. Near the door opening on the lake was a rustic bench, impossible as a refuge. Only in one corner, where empty boxes and a disused skiff formed a barricade, could he hope for concealment. He glided thither, and on the floor between the dusty wall of broad boards and the jumbled partition, he found a man stretched on his back.

At first he thought he had surprised a sleeper, but as the figure did not move he decided it must be a corpse.

He would have fled but for his need of this corner. He bent down. The man was bound hand and foot. In the mouth a gag was fastened. Neck and ankles were tied to spikes in the wall.

Willock swiftly surveyed the lake and the sloping hill leading down from the clubhouse. Nobody was near. As he stared at the landscape the front door of the clubhouse opened. He darted back to the corner. "Pardner," he said, "I got to ask your hospitality for a spell, and if you move so as to attract attention, I got to fix you better. I didn't do this here, pardner, but you shore look like some of my handiwork in days past and gone. I'll share this corner with you for awhile, and if you don't give me away to them that's coming, I promise to set you free. That's fair, I guess. 'A man ain't all bad,' says Brick, 'as unites the knots that other men has tied,' says he. Just lay still and comfortable, and we'll see what's coming."

Presently there were footprints in the path, and to Willock's intense disappointment Gledware and Annabel came in together. They were in the midst of a conversation, and at the first few words he found it related to Lahoma. The boatman who had promised to bring the skiff for them at 7—it developed that Gledware had no intention of doing the rowing—had not yet come. They sat down on the rustic bench, their voices distinctly audible in all parts of the small building.

"Her closest living relative," Gledware said, "is a great-aunt living in Boston. As soon as I found out who she was—I'd always supposed her living among Indians and that it would be impossible to find her—but as soon as I learned the truth, without saying anything to her, I wrote to her great-aunt. I've never been in a position to take care of Lahoma—I felt that I ought to place her with her own family. I got an answer—about what you would expect. They'd give her a home."

"I told them what a respectable girl she is—fairly creditable appearance—intelligent enough. But they couldn't stand those people she lives with—criminals, you know. Annabel, highwayman, murderers! Imagine Brick Willock in a Boston drawing room but you couldn't."

"No," Annabel agreed. "Poor Lahoma! And I know she'd never give him up."

"That's it. She's immovable. She'd insist on taking him along. But he belongs to another age—a different country. He couldn't understand. He thinks when you've anything against a man the proper move is to kill 'im. He's just like an Indian—a wild beast. Wouldn't know what we meant if we talked about civilization. His religion is the knife. Well, you see, if he were out of the way, Lahoma would have her chance."

(Continued Next Week)

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