

THE SOCIETY WOLF

A CLOSED DOOR



By LUKE THRICE



HERE WAS THE BALM AND THE SOLACE AND THE LIFE

THE slamming of the outer door to his apartments sent a tiny shock through Carter, and he frowned unpleasantly. He had been aware of late that trifles played upon his nerves like the jagged edge of a clumsy weapon. He promised himself an interview with Hopkins that should impress that obsequious functionary into catlike regard for the quiet now so essential to his master.

As he sat forward in his chair Hopkins drew back the hall curtains, but the outburst that the Virginian had prepared did not come. Hopkins, standing in respectful attitude, his silver card salver poised at the proper angle, was suddenly thrust aside without ceremony, and a smiling, debonaire little figure swaggered past him into the room.

"Thousand pardons, Carteret, my good chap, but I never wait upon ceremony when calling upon a friend y' know."

Carter did not appear to be overwhelmed with enthusiasm at the implied honor. He rose, however, waved Hopkins away and shook hands with a gesture that, while not perfunctory, was far from indicating any warm regard for his visitor.

"How are you, Detray? What on earth brought you here?"

The other laughed. "First of all, I'm dry. Anything interesting in that cabinet over there? If so, why not?" He had actually started to open the liquor closet himself. Carter, restraining his exasperation with considerable difficulty, hastened to forestall him, and his visitor subsided with a brandy and soda and his brazen smile into the corner of a divan.

There were very few persons from whom Carter would have taken such behavior at that particular time, but there were very excellent reasons why he should overlook it coming from this one. Reggie Detray was among the most powerful as he was easily the best hated man in New York society.

There was nothing in Detray's appearance as he sat on the divan nursing his glass of sparkling amber to suggest the redoubtable. His beardless face was as innocent as the dew fresh rose, without the trace of an ulterior thought. But Carter knew, as many another had cause to, that Detray's reason for being was the pain and the unhappiness and the torment of others; knew that behind this mask of an idle boy was a brain worthy of a grand inquisitor, restless, steel keen and evil. The coming of Detray at such a moment chilled him. The man had never visited him before, had never more than recognized him.

HIS DEFENSE RALLIES

The Virginian, conscious that he could not bring to the contest the strength and force that had once been his and that the last few months had sapped from him, prepared to meet the ordeal under a reserve of dogged impassiveness. It was his best defense and now his only one.

"Looking rather seedy, old chap," giggled Detray. "Find the going pretty rough?"

"I'm quite well, thanks," answered Carter restrainedly.

"Rattling clever quarters you've got here, 'pon my word. No end of dash." Detray leaned forward and placed his empty glass upon a table. "Haven't seen you at the Wampum lately. Heard some wise fellow saying you were a bit under the weather."

"It's very kind of you to look in," said Carter, "but I'm quite fit."

Detray laughed, a queer little laugh with a jig saw note, apparently inspired thereto by Carter's hollow tone. "Well, it's good to hear you say so."

Carter could see no end to this badinage, and with a total absence of the finesse upon which he had prided himself tried to hurry the game. "What is it, Reggie?" he asked defiantly. "What's the use of stalling around? You haven't come here to condole with me about a mortified toe or the state of my health. Now, fire ahead."

Detray became suddenly very solemn, innocently solemn, like a youthful owl. "As a matter of fact I did have a purpose, Carteret. I often think this is a rotten world we live in, absolutely not worth the time we give it. But in spite of the truism that a decent action is altogether unfashionable, I invariably make it a custom to break the rule whenever I have the chance."

"Sort of don't care a rap attitude?" suggested Carter, who was beginning to find an unsuspected resource of temper. Detray waved the interruption aside like one who is not to be deterred.

"Don't misunderstand me," he said, with an injured air. "I never break in with my advice if there is no call. But when I see a situation that demands—quite demands—a helping hand, why I sometimes venture to offer it." Carter nodded acknowledgment to the slave of duty with a grimace.

"Of course," continued Detray, smoothing his gloves delicately over his knee, "the cause of most of our woes is a bitter tongue. People will talk." He sighed over the contemplation of the indicated depravity.

"Is this an essay on platitudes?" inquired the Virginian, shifting in his chair. A flash like a leap of

flame through smoke came into the dull eyes of Detray, but his voice held its guilelessness.

"Platitudes with a personal application are sometimes worth considering," he drawled. "You are furnishing material for one as old as earth itself, but it has not lost its interest in the ears of those about you."

"Well?" said Carter.

"It won't do, Carteret," went on Detray, smoothly. "You're not careful enough. Understand once more that I speak in friendship. Surely my presence here is proof of it. But you must be more careful if you expect to be recognized again by any one worth while. That's flat."

THE NAME

"Come again, Reggie, you're talking parables," Carter's words were easy, but they caught in his throat.

"Why sidestep? It's Mrs. Osterman," said Detray.

In that moment the Virginian saw by how far he had lost his triumphant, winning attitude. The old Carter would have pitched Detray into the street, either literally or with biting retort. But he no more than winced at the name. Bitterly as he resented the man and his slimmish he was aware that he wished to hold him. This was the thing he had feared. People were talking. What were they saying? How difficult had his position become? He submitted because he had lost his grip and because he wanted to know.

"Well?" he said again, hoarsely.

"It is perfectly well known that you were infatuated with her before her marriage," resumed Detray, sensing, and, as it were, sipping the Virginian's distress. "These things get about, Lord can tell how. It is even public property that you helped her out of a very delicate situation by suppressing certain blackmailers. For a time, of course, the marriage stopped gossip. But now—" he shrugged.

Something in Carter lashed him to speech. "What now?" he said, grasping the arms of his chair.

"Why, my dear fellow, you know better than I possibly can. Folks say that you have seen her every day for a month. Osterman, meanwhile, has been at Hot Springs with a corps of physicians. You have accompanied her continually to places where people go, at unseasonable hours. You have been handling vast investments for her while—" He checked Carter's violent gesture with a wave. "You should not be surprised. These things would not be known if you had not been indiscreet. And as a man of the world, you know what goes about when a man attends to a woman's money for her. That means but one thing."

It was the hot iron against the hurt of the wounded wolf that hurled the Virginian across the intervening space to the divan. Raging, white, in raw revolt against this smiling, soft voiced demon, he leaped with grasping hands. He caught Detray about the

neck and sprang upon him, crushing his body under one knee with a wild, primitive joy in the feel of a prey. Social ambition, all that had seemed sweetest to him through the years of struggle, seemed as naught now, though perhaps the conviction that he had lost his conquest served to spur his fury. But chiefly his mind ached under the blow that Detray had dealt him, as a man, and mostly he hungered for revenge upon this evil bit of flesh—His clutch tightened.

Detray lay and smiled up at him—The fire had flared into a blaze behind the dull smoke of his eyes. Weak, helpless, with never a move to escape the hold of the stronger man, he showed no sign of fear, made no sign or resistance or appeal. Several times his lips parted as he essayed to speak, patiently, as one might strive against a temporary impediment. Carter looked down at that pink face, fascinated; saw it change to white and from white to blue without relaxing the band of muscle. The eyes, smiling into his, grew dim. The mass beneath his knee became flaccid, yielding. Then the eyelids fell.

With a terrible cry Carter released his hands and staggered back, staring at the silent, limp figure huddled upon the divan. Hopkins, trembling, horrified by the strange summons and the stranger sight that met his eyes, shuffled in and stood helpless.

"The brandy," gasped Carter. "Quick!"

With hurried, awkward movements, interfering and stumbling in their haste, they applied the restorative. For a breathless minute they watched. Then, slowly, a faint flush came back to the pallid cheek and Carter breathed a leaden sigh of abject thankfulness. He waved Hopkins from the room and fell, fainting, into his chair.

AN AMAZING LITTLE MAN

They sat some time later and looked at each other, Carter with the expression of a condemned criminal, Detray without emotion of any kind. The silence lasted long, until the Virginian reached out a faltering arm and strove for a word, however pitiful and inadequate, to break the unbearable situation. Then the extraordinary little man spoke, and Carter shivered at the tone.

"As I was about to observe," he said, "that is the last thing, the thing that one can not do." He paused, but the Virginian made no move. Resolution, courage, determination were qualities that he could well understand, for he was no stranger to them. But this was something that he could not even put a name to. He listened as passively as if the other had been reciting a prayer for the dead.

"You see how it is," went on Detray, loosening his wet collar with languid gesture. "There are many sins—to return to our platitudes—but there is only one unforgivable sin. And that is to be caught with the goods. Of course, in your private account with the recording angel you may well be quite guiltless. That does not alter the matter a jot.

The vital point is whether folks are convinced thus and so in regard to your actions. If they are, you are done, unless you happen to be born among the demigods, and you, R. Pendleton, were not. Is that clear?"

"You are essentially a vulgarian, Carteret," he purred. "It is a waste of time to sharpen epigrams upon your epidermis. Still, it was my pleasure and is to let you know where you stand."

Carter did not answer and Detray stood looking at him a moment. Then the little man showed the strangest glimpse of his strange personality, a side, perhaps, that no one else had ever seen in him. He stepped forward quickly, holding out his hand and smiling his same brazen smile. "But, if you don't mind, I'd like to thank you for a new sensation. With your aid I discovered a new savor of living when I almost ceased to live." Carter, uncomprehending, returned his clasp. When he glanced up from the daze into which he had fallen some minutes later Detray was gone.

In the bitter hour of reflection that came to him

then he saw himself stripped of the plates of mail with which he had buckled himself during his long, wearing fight. The battered armor of battle fell away and left him naked and futile and pitiful. He looked about him, in this sweet land of purple and gold, this upper height to which he had won by stratagem, sally, ambush, at the point of a conquering sword, this stratum of the socially elect. And he found it strewn with shards, cold, unlovely, repelling.

He bore scars upon him, too, and these he marked. The old ones that had healed and the newer ones, still sharp and gaping, that had fallen upon him during his last month of breathless, wearing combat. For he had fought, fought hard to hold what he had gained, fought against the leaping traitorous revolt in his own breast and—the call of a woman. He had fought, and he had won. And to what purpose? Only to learn that victory was denied him, that he had been condemned and banished by judges who saw but the thick dust of conflict raging about him and said that he had lost. And this was the end of his ambition!

JAR TO THE NERVES

But there was a cooling draft ready to his lips. If he left this land under sentence he need not go alone or unaccompanied. There was still one prize, one compensation that he could carry back with him to the lower levels, the outer darkness. He had handled her investments, Detray had said. Yes, that was true. And he had done well, with the shrewd knowledge he had gained in his campaign. He had piled gold upon her gold and she was wealthy in her own right. He had never permitted himself to read the full message in her eyes when he brought her more and still more. But now he remembered it and read it. He and she should take it for their journey back.

He was standing in the dark room looking out into the lamplit canyon of the street when the sudden slamming of his outer door set every nerve in him to jangling. With a furious protest on his lips he strode to the switch and snapped it, waiting for the appearance of the obsequious Hopkins. He saw the man's hand draw back the curtain, caught a passing glimpse of his lowered head, and she stepped into the full flood of the light.

The years of marriage had wrought small change in Marion Keith, now Mrs. Osterman. Slim, girlish, her clear, gray eyes had lost none of their clearness, the curve of her fair face none of its purity. She was dressed for evening and where the cloak fell away her young shoulders showed white and firm. Her entrance from between the dark curtains was theatrical, but none the less effective. He recalled her as he had seen her on her wedding night in the dim hall, when all her precious person had seemed to hold a distinct radiance. Now, under the lights, she was dazzling.

He wanted until the shuffling feet of Hopkins had passed down the hall and then he took her hand. In her eyes, close to his, he caught again the old signal, and again, as always, came the answering surge within him. "What do you want here, Marion?" he asked as he led her to a chair. He did not stop to find why he had not seized her in his arms, as in the hot fury of imagination he so often seized her. Perhaps it was because he had the habit of the struggle was still strong upon him. She answered him with straight glance, unwavering, as he sought the divan.

"I thought it was time to come," she said, simply. "Does it help matters to say that?" he asked, just as he would have asked months ago when the first blow of the fray had fallen from his raised arm.

"Robert, this is the end," she answered firmly.

He strode to her and caught her in his arms. She yielded her lithe body to him as he knelt beside her, clinging close, and signal spoke to signal in their eyes. Here was the balm and the solace and the life. He said it, fiercely, while he sought her lips.

"We will go away," she murmured, against his shoulder. "My little dowry that you tended so carefully has grown to be more than enough for us. We will find a far corner somewhere."

"Yes."

"You have won your way where you wished to go and you have seen what it had to offer, and it was worthless."

"Yes."

"And you have a shred of backward thought for it because it was false, and shallow, and cruel."

"Yes, and cruel," he repeated. He thought of the dark strife he had waged to no purpose, how the judges had judged him from the dust of battle; how he had been banished as a loser while still standing firm; how Reggie Detray had been the messenger of that defeat; how, because he was not one of the demigods, he must go back the way he had come. It was cruel. Let him take his prize and be gone.

THE MENTAL RESERVATION

A tiny thought wisp obtruded, whirling through the undammed surge in his heart, through the sweeping demand for love and comfort and compensation and healing. It would be the surrender; it would be the final striking of the pennon he had held aloft. Even though the others might think him beaten, there remained his own knowledge that he was not. And to surrender now would be to justify—

Wait! There was more behind. He had thrown a disguising glamour upon the situation. But he knew, even in that mad moment, that the one whole spot in his ragged remnant of self-respect was the fact that this was a good fight and he had not yet lost it. He held the wisp fast and caught another. The reason for his desperate attack upon Detray had been because that remnant was more than dear to him—it was essential. Again, he caught another. If he had lost that remnant he would become just the low, cheap, despicable adventurer he had always held himself above—the man who stole because he was not wise enough to be honest.

An effort, and he had his wisps pieced together into a very fair semblance of a tangible issue.

His arms lost their tense clasp. Before he knew it he had risen from his knees and was walking the floor. Nerveless, almost blinded, the haggard warrior picked up his fallen weapon, raised his banner and made ready for a renewal of the combat, still unconquered.

Marion watched him for some minutes in silence as he paced before her, chin on his breast. If her mouth quivered a little he did not see it. She rose from the chair and walked to the curtains. He stopped and faced her, but said nothing.

"I rather thought it might be this way," she said, with level eyes that met his proudly and even steadily. "But I wanted to make sure. We won't carry on our little problem play, Robert. It ends here, and she withdrew it quickly. Afterward he went to the window and saw her enter a taxicab, which turned and disappeared toward Fifth avenue.

Suddenly his outer door slammed with a crash. He started, frowning, and waited impatiently with his gaze on the curtains. Hopkins insinuated himself into the room with his card tray and respectfully presented a telegram. Carter tore it open and unfolded the yellow inclosure. This is what he read:

"You win. Osterman died at Hot Springs this evening. Congratulations. REGGIE."

Carter returned the telegram to its original folds with great precision, replaced it in the envelope and put it carefully into his pocket. Hopkins stood at respectful attention during this operation.

"Oh, by the way, Hopkins," said the Virginian, quietly, "I wish you would please be a little more careful in closing that door."

(The final story next week.)

"It is because I have never taken the initiative that you must bear with me now. Why should we be ordinary? Why should you and I talk like visored folk that are ashamed to show or to look upon the face of truth?"

"Some there be that look upon it and die," he said with a slow smile.

"And some that must look upon it to live," she returned quickly. "I have always known, as you must have known, that this could not go on forever. I brought it all clear before myself today. And if I needed an emphasis of the result I received word to rejoin—Mr.—Osterman tomorrow. I shall not go to him. I shall never pass another day under the same roof with him. I can not. It is all very plain."

PASSION IN TATTERS

A whim, a fancy, a shred of the torn banner under which he had withstood all assaults from her and from her ally in his breast these last months summoned his weapon to a parry once more. He laughed, a little wearily.

"We have all the elements here, Marion. Lovers parted by unnecessary obstacle of a husband. She comes to his rooms alone, at night. Passion ripped to tatters. We lack nothing but the slow music. You spoke of common folk a moment ago. Can you find me a ranting dramatist of them all who hasn't seasoned that dish in every conceivable way?"

She pleaded little folds in her cloak and regarded him calmly. "I know you when you talk that way, Robert. I know. But it doesn't make the slightest difference. It made no difference when you cleared the path of my mother by getting that letter back from Jerry Coskar. Nor when you cleared it again by preventing an interruption on my wedding night that would have made the wedding impossible. Nor many times since."

"Your mother?" he asked, twisting his blade once more.

"Why do you fence with me?" she said with a faint flush. "I never hid it from you, even at the first. I was willing that the marriage should be prevented. It was my mother who wished it, and I have bitterly unwished it since. You were helping her."

"Is that all I was doing?" He leaned forward a little.

"No," she said slowly. "You were afraid to— to put your visor up. In cold fact, you would not permit yourself to look upon the truth. I had no fortune. I could not have helped you in your climbing, and at that time nothing else was of importance."

It was his turn to flush. She was right. She knew him, had traced the thread of his motive through the maze he had woven about himself. And now she touched him on that tenderest-masculine spot—his vanity.

It was well that he should see himself mean and sordid and crawling, but it was beyond endurance that she should share that sight. Could her love for him condone the matters she so clearly and simply understood? The revolt surged strong within him, crying that love was his refuge from this new thing; from defeat, from wounds, from striving; that it would clothe him gloriously for them both, covering his weakness, rehabilitating him; that it would heal and forgive.