



Cherub Devine

By
SEWELL FORD

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CHAPTER X.
NICHOLAS squirmed a little in his chair.
"Mr. Devine is in many ways a—er—a remarkable man."
"If he were only something besides a stock gambler. If he would only apply his talents to something different."
"I hadn't thought of his talents as being misdirected," he said slowly. "But he has evidently been listening to some one who thinks as you do, for he tells me that he has given up speculating in stocks."

"He has given up? Why? When?"
"At noon today, when he obtained control of the F. Z. and N. railroad and became its president."

"A railroad president? Why, that is quite a respectable position, isn't it?"
"Almost," gravely answered Mr. Wallowsky.

"Isn't he splendid?" exclaimed the countess, clasping her hands. "And don't you think, Nicholas, now that he has—well, reformed—that he will be asked about among nice people?"

"My dear countess," began Nicholas, once more assuming the judicial pose. "You must not forget that he is still Cherub Devine. As a successful manipulator of stock he is entitled to respect; as a railroad president he will be a financial power to be reckoned with; as to his social fitness, that is a matter to which I have not given the attention which you appear."

"An I being lectured, Nicholas Wallowsky," asked the countess demurely. "I trust we have known each other long enough, Adele, for me to offer a friendly suggestion. But if you resent such—"

"Oh, no! Go on, Nicholas. What else about Mr. Devine?"
"Young Mr. Wallowsky flushed under the subtle mockery of her eyes.

"Nothing more, countess," and he bowed softly. "Only I did not know that you considered Mr. Devine a—"

"The countess laughed lightly. "Oh, I've told him he wasn't."
"You—you said that to the Cherub?"

"The countess nodded.
"And he—what did he—"

"He said he had never claimed to be a gentleman."

"Ah!" Young Mr. Wallowsky seemed to have gained a new viewpoint. His exclamation was one of relief. Now he could understand the attitude of the countess toward Cherub Devine. It was merely an impersonal interest which she had taken in a somewhat picturesque public character whom she had chanced to see at close range.

"I beg pardon for my suggestion," he went on. "I see you know the Cherub better than I thought. Interesting chap, isn't he? He has his good points, too—oh, really, has a code of honor all his own that he sticks to as faithfully as if it were—well, the accepted code. And he is generous itself to those whom he finances."

"Is he, indeed?"
"There was an encouraging note in her tone.

"Oh, extremely! Now, in the matter of buying those shares, they were never actually quoted at that figure you know, but he needed them very badly, and he fixed the price accordingly, whereas he might have purchased them for a fifth as much and still paid you the highest market rate."

"Then he practically makes me a gift of this?" And the countess fluttered the pink cheek disbelievingly.

"Oh, no! Had I been selling the shares for you, knowing how badly he needed them, I could have forced him to pay even more. No, it was a business transaction, but generosity was displayed none the less. And his offer to hand over Howington Acres at his own terms—that is another example. Of course he doesn't want the place in his hands, but he could readily dispose of it at a profit. Evidently he wishes you to retain possession, however."

"So it would appear," mused the countess. "I wonder why?"
Nicholas pursed his lips quizzically.

"I suppose it has not occurred to you that he might be—well, interested in you?"

The countess eyed him with cool unconcern.

"I'm afraid you are making rather an impudent guess, Mr. Wallowsky."

"But it's no guess, Devine told me himself—that is, he as good as confessed as much."

Her calm poise was ruffled. Color flashed into her cheeks betrayingly.

"Do you mean to imply that he talked to you of—of me?" she demanded.

"Well, I will admit that I drew him out. I could see plain enough, you know, and when I asked him he didn't attempt to deny, although he did have the grace to protest his own unworthiness. Good! He has improved the opportunities you gave him! He has had the audacity to fall in love with you, countess. My congratulations on your conquest!"

He held his head at a knowing angle.

"Then why did he send you here to-day instead of coming himself?"

"Unaccountable. Perhaps he flunked at the last moment. He may have thought you would not accept his favors if offered directly, so he asked me to come. Me! Isn't that rich?"

"In just what way?" And so quietly did she ask it that Nicholas should have warned.

"Why, he doesn't know how long I have waited for just such a chance. But you know, Adele, and now—"

He had risen and was approaching the countess with outstretched arms. All that was needed to complete the happy reunion was for her to throw

herself into them. However, that was not precisely what happened.

"Nicholas," said the countess reprovingly, "sit down."

"But if you will only just listen to—"

"Please sit down, Nicholas," Nicholas said.

"You used to tell me, Adele, that you loved—"

"Did I? It's no wonder, for you were forever mooning around asking me if I did."

"I can imagine no reason why you should refuse to hear me say that I love you and—"

"Well, there is a reason. If there wasn't I should invent one."

"I regret very deeply," he began, with great humility, "that anything I have just said—"

"Now, that's better," said the Countess, relenting cheerfully. "When you start regretting very deeply you don't in the least mean it, but you're on the right track. Now forgive me for bringing you up so sharply and let us finish our business. Ought I to accept all this money for those shares?"

"Wouldn't it seem rather strange for you to demand less than is offered?"

"You're right. Well, I accept, then. And I do want to buy back our home here. But I feel I ought to deal directly with Mr. Devine himself in that matter. You will see that he comes, will you?"

Mr. Wallowsky, assuming an air of stately gloom, stalked away from Howington Acres. By the time dinner was over he had quite recovered his usual poise and felt equal to the task of calling on Mr. Devine.

"Well," queried the Cherub eagerly. "How did you come on with the countess?"

"Excellent!" said Mr. Wallowsky, thinking only of the business he had been asked to transact. "It's all settled. She accepts."

"What's that, Nick? Accepts who?"

"Why, the check. She will buy back the property too."

"Oh! Is that all?" An unmistakable sigh of satisfaction came over the wiles.

"She wants to see you about it, though. Says she must deal direct. Wants to know if you can come to-morrow."

"Why, sure I can. But say, Nick, are you certain there's nothing else—no congratulations coming from me?"

"Why—er—you might congratulate the countess on making a good bargain if you wish."

This was indefinite, but concluding. "Poor old Nick," said the Cherub as he hung up the receiver. "He's had his tryout, though. Tomorrow he'll be up to me."

Cherub Devine, having resolutely slashed away all the entangling mesh of business cares, went smilingly out to Howington Acres and into the presence of the Countess Vecchi.

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sent Mr. Wallowsky here to offer me this check and an opportunity to buy back Howington Acres for the price you paid. Is that correct?"
"That's O. K., countess."
"Also you confided to Mr. Wallowsky that you were—that you entertained certain sentiments of regard for me. You called it love, I believe."
"Eh?" ejaculated the astonished Cherub. "Say, Nick didn't give me away like that, did he? Honest, he wasn't chump enough to let on that I said—"

"To be made the topic of such an intimate disclosure and by a person whom I have known for such a short time under such peculiar conditions, you can fancy perhaps that I'd rather not dwell on it."

"Great Scott," groaned the Cherub, beginning to wipe his forehead. "But give me a show here, countess. I'm trying to show how I came to do the slave act. Oh, I must have done it, all right, but how?"

"I'm afraid I can't share your interest in that problem. Let us not go into it any deeper, if you please. You told Mr. Wallowsky, and then—"

"Ah, I remember. He wished me luck. Wasn't that nice of him when—"

"When what?" spurred on the countess.

"Why, when—when he was in the same boat."

"So Mr. Wallowsky exchanged confidences, did he? Delightful!"

"No, no! Nick didn't say a word. I found it out by accident. Saw your picture in his pocket, you know, and I'd heard about how he and you used to—"

"Really! I'm glad that there was some reserve in that discussion. Was it held on a street corner or in a hotel lobby?"

"Train," groaned the Cherub.

"Ah!" said the countess. "The other passengers must have been uncertain. Did any of them offer advice?"

The Cherub sank into a chair.

"That's right," he observed. "Keep it up, I deserve it."

"Remember," commented the countess, "is always touching, but it arrives so late in the day. I am curious on only one point. Having made your confession to Mr. Wallowsky and having learned of his—well, his attitude toward me—what prompted you to send him here?"

"Why, I thought Nick ought to have his chance."

"You—you thought?" The Countess Vecchi appeared to grasp his meaning but slowly. Her brown eyes no longer resembled any kind of fireworks. They regarded him with wide wonder.

"You see," continued the Cherub earnestly, "he's so much nearer you kind of a chap—in your class and all—that I didn't know how you two stood, you know. Why, it didn't look just right for me to butt in before—well, before you and Nick had a show to make it up if you wanted to. That's all. It was only right."

The silence which had followed his explanation lasted for several moments, and when the Countess Vecchi again spoke the clear cut sharpness of her tone was somewhat softened.

"I understand. I believe I have been told by some one that you had a code of honor that was all your own. Well, have you heard what use Mr. Wallowsky made of his opportunity?"

"I had him call me up last night. I couldn't ask him right out, you know, but—"

"More delicacy!" murmured the countess.

"Oh, that's nothing for me. But I made him say enough so I could guess how he came out. You told him he wouldn't do, didn't you?"

The shoulders of the Countess Vecchi lifted a trifle at this.

"I tried to be entirely frank with Mr. Wallowsky as I am now trying to be frank with you, Mr. Devine. I wish to ask you if my acceptance of this check is a purely business transaction."

"Why sure?"

"You would have paid as much to any one else?"

"Been paid to."

"And about your offer of Howington Acres?"

"Straight business."

"Then I accept both proposals." She paused, then spoke softly. "Good afternoon, Mr. Devine."

As he had found her, so she stood when he turned to leave the library. About her erect figure there was all the suggestion of a highly strung bow, which he took to mean that she was immensely displeased with him. What a mess he had made of everything, to be sure!

Absorbed in these uncomfortable reflections, the Cherub narrowly escaped a collision with the solemnly attired Eppings, who had stalked forward to open the door.

The Cherub hesitated. Was it his characteristic reluctance to acknowledge defeat or a sense of not having lived up to his own code? He might at least have told her he was sorry.

"Wait a minute, Eppings. Guess I've forgotten something."

A few resolute strides took him back into the room where he had left her. Perhaps she had not gone. No, there she was, but—Why, what was up now? It was quite obvious that the Countess Vecchi had buried her face in the window draperies and was leaning against the wall of the room. Moreover, from the convulsive rise and fall of her shoulders it looked as if she were sobbing.

"Oh!" As she wheeled quickly to ward him, saw who it was, realized that he was standing there looking at her, she dabbed furtively at her burning eyes with a wholly inadequate handkerchief. "I—I thought," she went on, "that you had—had—"

"Yes, but I came back. You're not crying, are you?"

"Crying! Certainly not!"

"Well, if I was, I'm not now. I shall not again—ever."

"That's right. You see, countess, I'm going to feel bad enough about this whole thing to do for both of us. That's what I came back to say. I don't know just how to put it, but it seems to me that I can do no more than to tell you that I am a—"

Cherub Devine fell down, even if it comes to bumping on the door.

"There, countess, I'm—"

"What, countess, I'm—"

bid. Honest, I never meant to tell Nick. I was just going to— The Cherub faltered.

"You were going to do what?" suggested the countess.

"Why, to spring it on you. Oh, I can guess what you would say to it, but—huh! See here, countess, I could not help it. You're the best I ever knew, just seeing you these few days made things seem worth while. Why, I didn't know what I was living for before. And then before I knew how far I'd gone I was seeing nothing but you. I wish I could tell you all about that countess."

"No, no, you mustn't!" Again she turned to the draperies, hiding her flushed face in her hands.

"Maybe if you hadn't read so many of those newspaper yarns about me—"

"It isn't that; truly it is not," came in a muffled tone from the countess.

"Of course I can see where I don't measure up with the kind of men you've known, and I tried to keep that in mind all the time, but—well, I couldn't do it, that's all. You see, I haven't had much use for women. I thought they were all alike. But you—you're different, countess. I wish I was different too. I wish I was more like Nick. If I was perhaps I could make you see how much I need you—"

"Oh, say, countess, couldn't you just let me say—"

"No, no, don't say it, please!" This came faintly, for her face was still hidden.

"All right, I won't." The Cherub seemed to be swallowing the words.

"Really! I'm glad that there was some reserve in that discussion. Was it held on a street corner or in a hotel lobby?"

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of tick birds, spy fellows that not only rob their hosts of insect pests, but, at the same time, stand a pretty vicious watch. With a due regard for the wind, however, we managed to stalk unseen the row and call until we were within forty yards of them. Then the birds discovered us, and with their jarring cries of alarm, gave warning that a foe approached.

We were the two men in suspicion. As they could not smell us, their next effort was to locate us by sight. While they were doing this, I snapped the shutter, and of the sound they broke into instant action. They stalked out their heads and came for us without doubt or hesitation, and such was their impetuous haste that they were within twenty yards of us before I had the shutter reset and ready.

It was not a time for palaver, Clark, for I was dreading to let them get any nearer, for with the rifle at the cock, and struck her a glancing blow on the shoulder.

"Though not a mortal wound, it was effective enough, turning her, and with a loud 'tackling' she fell back, she bounded away in the distance. As it was our first really intimate view of a wild thing, the experience was hardly reassuring. However, the day was young yet, and as events were to prove, we had made a very beginning.

A mile farther on, two other rhinos came into view. They were feeding on a little several hundred yards away, a pair of bullock, followed by a single specimen of their kind. Though still a little shaky after our recent experience, we decided for a go, especially since one of them had a very fair horn.

We also decided we must use extreme care in our attack, for the rhino is a very dangerous animal, and it was in our favor, we should have to cross a bare, open stretch of ground, utterly lacking in cover.

At the outset, the attack seemed rather hopeless. For we innocently believed that the two would see us and instantly take to their heels. We were crawling along as quietly as possible, when suddenly a third rhino appeared, coming directly down wind, and only a little more than a hundred yards away. A few steps farther, and the wind would have given him our scent—a hint, a gentle reminder would have been charging upon us full tilt. This would have placed us in a very awkward position, and the other two, in case they did not run, and, badly retreating the idea, we turned and crawled the other way. Once out of range of his nose, however, we turned, and with the telephone lens I took a number of pictures at long range.

In the midst of this, we were delighted to see the old boy get back for his second shot. First of all, he began turning in his tracks just as a dog will do, sniffing at the ground about him. Then, when he had made sure it was his liking, he finally laid himself down. Nothing could have been more satisfactory, and, exercising every caution, we moved forward until we were within twenty yards of the huge, unconscious slumberer. Our hearts were beating as if to break when we stood up and gazed at him, for we fully expected a sudden and dangerous charge. Clark, who stood beside me, held the rifle ready for instant use, while I trained the camera on our friend. For some seconds they seemed like hours, then we stood absolutely quiet, making no sound, though we trembled with excitement. The rhino, however, still slept on, breathing peacefully, though not quite so beautifully, as a child, and uttering obnoxious of the presence of his enemy. Then, when we could endure the suspense no longer, I called aloud to him, "Come on, then!"

Never was an order more promptly and obediently obeyed. At the sound of my voice, he was up like a flash. One look showed him where we stood; he emitted a peculiar snort, raised his waving tail, and came to stand and face the lens upon him. He had not even a chance to get into the front of an oncoming crowd, you can imagine a part of the feeling. On the big brute came, bigger and bigger he grew on the camera's ground-glass screen. I dared not remove my eyes from it for fear of losing the focus, and so I stood until it seemed as if the beast were ready to step over me. When I thought he was about to stick his horn through camera and all, I released the shutter's catch and there I had him!