

The POOL of FLAME

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—The story opens at Monte Carlo with Col. Terence O'Rourke in his hotel. O'Rourke, a military free lance and something of a gambler, is dressing for appearance in the restaurant below when the sound of a girlish voice singing attracts his attention. Leaning out on the balcony he sees a beautiful girl who suddenly disappears. He rushes to the corridor to see a neatly gowned form enter the elevator and pass from sight.

CHAPTER II.—O'Rourke's mind is filled with thoughts of the girl, and when he goes to the gaming table he allows his remarkable winnings to accumulate indifferently. He notices two men watching him. One is the Hon. Bertie Glynn, while his companion is Viscount Des Trebes, a noted duelist. When O'Rourke leaves the table the viscount tells him he represents the French government and that he has been directed to O'Rourke as a man who would undertake a secret mission.

CHAPTER III.—At his room O'Rourke, who had agreed to undertake the mission, awaits the viscount. O'Rourke finds a mysterious letter in his apartment. The viscount arrives, hands a sealed package to O'Rourke, who is not to open it until on the ocean. He says the French government will pay O'Rourke 25,000 francs for his services. A pair of dainty slippers are seen protruding from under a doorway curtain and the viscount charged O'Rourke with having a spy secreted there.

CHAPTER IV.—When the Irishman goes to his room he finds there the owner of the mysterious feet. It is his wife, Beatrice, from whom he had been away a year previous. They are reconciled, and opening the letter he had received, he finds that a law firm in Rangoon, India, offers him 100,000 pounds for an article well known as the Pool of Flame and left to him by a dying friend. O'Rourke tells his wife that it is in the keeping of a friend named Chambret in Algeria.

CHAPTER V.

At five in the morning a heavy motor car of the most advanced type stole in sinister silence out of the courtyard of the Hotel d'Orient, at the same sedate pace and with the same surreptitious air skulked through the town, and finally swung eastwards upon the Route de la Corniche, suddenly discarding all pretense of docility and swooping onward with a windy roar, its powerful motor purring like some gigantic tiger-cat.

It carried four; at the wheel a goggled and enmuted operator in shapeless and hideous garments; in the tonneau its owner, a middle-aged French manufacturer with pouched eyes, a liver, lank jaws clean-scraped, and an expression of high-minded devotion to duty; Captain von Elnem in uniform; and Colonel O'Rourke.

At the end of an hour's run, disturbed by one or two absurdly grave conferences between the seconds, in appropriate monotones, the mechanic put on the brakes and slowed down the car, then deftly swung it into a narrow lane, a leafy tunnel through which it crawled for a minute or two ebe debouching into a broad and sunlit meadow, walled in by woodland, conspicuously secluded.

To one side and at a little distance a second motor-car stood at rest; its operator had removed the hood and was tinkering with the motor in a most matter-of-fact manner. In the body of the machine Monsieur le Vicomte des Trebes, ostentatiously unaware of the advent of the second party, sat twisting rapier-points to his moustaches and concentrating his gaze on infinity. O'Rourke observed with malicious delight the nose of the duelist, much inflamed.

Advancing from his antagonist's position three preternaturally serious gentlemen of France in black frock coats and straight-brimmed silk hats waded ankle deep in dripping grass to meet O'Rourke's representatives.

The two parties met, saluted one another with immense reserve, and retired to a suitable distance to confer; something which they did wordily, with enthusiasm and many picturesque gestures. At first strangely amicable, the proceedings soon struck a snag. A serious difference of opinion arose. O'Rourke divined that the conference had gone into executive session upon the question of weapons. He treated himself to a secret grin, having anticipated this trouble.

The choice of weapons being his, as the challenged, he had modestly selected revolvers and had brought with him a brace of Webleys, burly pieces of pocket ordnance with short barrels and cylinders chambered to hold half a dozen .45 cartridges. They were not pretty, for they had seen service in their owner's hands for a number of years, but they were undeniably built for business. And at sight of them the friends of the vicomte recoiled in horror.

Eventually a compromise was arrived at. Monsieur Juillard stepped back, saluted, and with Von Elnem returned to his principal, his face a mask of disappointment. As for himself, he told O'Rourke, he was desolated, but the seconds of Monsieur des Trebes had positively refused to consent to turning a meeting of honor into a massacre. They proposed to substitute regulation French dueling pistols as sanctioned by the Code. Such as that which Monsieur le Colonel O'Rourke might observe in Monsieur Juillard's hand.

O'Rourke blinked and sniffed at it. "Sure," he contended, "tis a magnifying glass I need to make it visible to me undressed eye. What the divvie does it carry—a dried pea? What

d'they think we're here for, if not to slay one another with due ceremony? Ask them that. Am I to salute the vicomte's wounded honor by smiting him with a spitball? I grant ye, 'tis magnificent, but 'tis not a pistol."

Grumbling, he allowed himself to be persuaded. As he had foreseen and prophesied, so had it come to pass. Yet he had to grumble, partly because he was the O'Rourke, partly for effect.

None the less, he consented, and in the highest spirits left the car and plowed through the lush wet grass to the spot selected for the encounter, in the shadow of the trees near the eastern border of the meadow. Here, the seconds having tossed for sides, he took a stand at one end of a sixty-foot stretch and, still indelicately amused, received a loaded pistol from Von Elnem.

Des Trebes confronted him, white with rage, regretting already (O'Rourke made no doubt) that he had not accepted the Webleys. The Irishman's open contempt maddened the man.

The seconds retired to a perfectly safe distance, Von Elnem holding the watch, one of Des Trebes' seconds a handkerchief. The chauffeurs threw away their cigarettes and sat up, for the first time roused out of their professional air of blasé indifference.

"One," cried the German clearly. Des Trebes raised his arm and leveled his pistol at O'Rourke's head. A faint flush colored his face, but his eye was cold and hard behind the sight and the hand that held the weapon was as steady as if supported by an invisible rest.

"Two," said Von Elnem. O'Rourke measured the distance with his eye and raised his arm from the elbow only, holding the pistol with a loose grip.

"Three," said Von Elnem. The handkerchief fell. The Irishman fired without moving. Des Trebes' weapon was discharged almost simultaneously, but with a ruined aim; its bullet went nowhere in particular. The Frenchman dropped the weapon and, wincing, examined solicitously a knuckle from which O'Rourke's shot had struck a tiny particle of skin. His seconds rushed to him with cries, preceded by the surgeon with bandages. O'Rourke gracefully surrendered his artillery to Juillard, and strolled back to the motor-car.

Juillard and Von Elnem presently joined him, the former insistently anxious to have O'Rourke descend and clasp the hand of fraternal friendship with the vicomte. But the Irishman refused.

"Faith, no!" he laughed. "Niver! I'm too timorous a man to dare it. Sure and hasn't he hugged both his seconds and the surgeon, too, already? For me own part I've no mind to be kissed. Let's hurry away before he celebrates further by imprinting a chaste salute upon the cheek of our chauffeur. . . . Besides, I've a train to catch."

CHAPTER VI.

Events marched to schedule; what O'Rourke planned came serenely to pass. He experienced a day as replete with emotions as the night that preceded it and more marked by activity. Nothing hindering, he left the battle-scarred Vicomte des Trebes upon the field of honor at half-past six; at seven forty-five he settled himself in a coach of the Cote d'Azur Rapide, en route for Marseilles—a happy man, for he was alone. . . . At a quarter to one in the afternoon of the same day he boarded the little steamer Tabarka of the Mediterranean ferry service; and half an hour later stood by the after-rail of its promenade deck, watching the distances widen between him and all that he held beloved.

"In ninety days, dear boy," she had said. . . . "Ah, Terence, Terence, if you should fall me . . . !"

"I shall not fall. . . . Rangoon in ninety days. Dear heart, I will be there. . . ."

As if to feed the hunger of his heart he strained his vision to see the last of the land that held her. At length it disappeared, and then for the first time he consciously moved—drew a hand across his eyes, sighed and turned away.

Picking his way through the cosmopolitan throng of passengers, he went below, found his stateroom, and subsided into the berth for a sorely-needed nap; instead of indulging in which, however, he lay staring wide-eyed at his problem. He had much to accomplish, much to guard against. Des Trebes bulked large in the background of perils he must anticipate; O'Rourke was by no means disposed to flatter himself that he had scotched the schemes of the vicomte.

He made his second public appearance on the Tabarka at the hour of sunset; and in the act of making it, turned a corner and ran plump into the arms of a young person in tweeds and a steamer cap—a stoutish young Englishman with a vivid complexion

and a bulldog pipe, nervousness tempering his native home-brewed insolence, the blank vacuity of his eyes hopelessly betraying the caliber of his intellect.

A sudden gust of anger swept O'Rourke off his figurative feet. He stopped short, blocking the gangway



So This Was What Had Been Set to Spy Upon Him.

and the young man's progress. So this was what had been set to spy upon him!

"Good evening to ye," he said coldly, fixing the Honorable Mr. Glynn with an interrogative eye that served to deepen his embarrassment and consternation. "I trust I didn't hurt ye, Mr. Glynn."

"Oh, no—not at all," stammered the Englishman. "Not in the least. No." He looked right and left of O'Rourke for a way round him, found himself with no choice but to retreat, and lost his presence of mind completely. "I—I say," he continued desperately, "I say, have you a match?"

"Possibly," conceded O'Rourke. "But I've yet to meet him. Of this ye may feel sure, however: if I have, 'tis neither yourself nor Des Trebes. Now run along and figure it out for yourself—what I'm meaning. Good-night."

He brushed past the man, leaving him astare in sudden pallor, and went his way, more than a little disgusted with himself for his lack of discretion. As matters turned out, however, he had little to reproach himself with; for his outbreak served to keep young Glynn at a respectful distance throughout the remainder of the voyage. They met but once more, and on that occasion the Englishman behaved himself admirably according to the tenets of his caste—met O'Rourke's challenging gaze without a flicker of recognition, looked him up and down calmly with the deadly enmured air peculiar to the underdone British youth of family and social position, and wandered calmly away.

O'Rourke watched him out of sight, a smile of appreciation curving his lips and tempering the perturbed and dangerous light in his eyes. "There's stuff in the lad, after all," he conceded without a grudge, "if he can carry a situation off like that. I'm doubting not at all that something might be whipped out of him, if he weren't what he's made himself—a slave to whisky."

For all of which appreciation, however, he soon wearied of Mr. Glynn. During the first day ashore it was not so bad; there was something amusing in being so openly dogged by a well-set-up young Englishman who had quite ceased to disguise his interest. But after that his shadowy surveillance proved somewhat distracting to a man busy with important affairs. And toward evening of the second day O'Rourke lost patience.

All day long in the sun, without respite he had knocked about from pillar to post of Algiers, seeking news of Chambret; and not until the eleventh hour had he secured the information he needed. Then, hurrying back to his hotel, he made arrangements to have his luggage cared for during an absence of indeterminate duration, hastily crammed a few indispensables into a kit box, and having dispatched that to the railway terminal, sought the restaurant for an early meal.

In the act of consuming his soup he became aware that the Honorable Bertie, in a dinner coat and a state of fidgets, had wandered down the outer corridor, passed at the restaurant door and espied his quarry. The fact that O'Rourke was dining with one eye on the clock and in a dust-proof, dust-colored suit of drill, was enough to disturb seriously the poise of the Englishman.

Exasperation stirred in O'Rourke. He eyed the young man rather morosely throughout the balance of his meal, a purpose forming in his mind and attaining the stature of a definite plan of action without opposition from the dictates of prudence. And at length swallowing his coffee and feeling his servant, he rose, crossed the room with a firm tread, and came to a full stop at the Honorable Mr. Glynn's table.

Momentarily he held his tongue, staring down at the young man while drumming on the marble with the fingers of one hand. Then Glynn, glancing up in a state of somewhat panic-stricken inquiry which strove vainly to seem insouciant, met the level stare of the adventurer and noticed the tense lines of his lips.

"I—I say," he floundered, "what's the matter with you, anyway? Can't you leave me a—lone?"

"I've been thinking," said O'Rourke crisply, disregarding the other's remark entirely, "that it might be of interest to ye to save ye a bit of botheration to know that I'm going up to

Biskra by tonight's train. It leaves in ten minutes, so I'll have to forego the pleasure of your society on the trip."

Glynn got a grip on himself and pulled together the elements of his manhood. He managed to infuse blank insolence into his stare, and said "Ow?" with that singularly maddening inflection of which the Englishman alone is master; as who should say: "Why the dooce d'you annoy me with your bally plans?"

"Don't believe I know you, do I?" he drawled.

"I don't believe ye do, me lad."

"Can't say I wish to very badly, either."

"I believe that," O'Rourke chuckled grimly.

The meaning in his tone sent the blood into the young man's face, a fiery flood of resentment.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of you, y'know," he said, bristling. "Of course you're not going to Biskra, or you wouldn't tell me so. But if you do, I shall make it my business to find out and follow by the next train—bringing Des Trebes with me."

"Oh, will ye so? Ye mean to warn me he's in Algeria, too?"

"His boat's due now; I'm expecting him at any moment, if you wish to know." O'Rourke's smiling contempt was angering the young man and rendering him reckless. "You'll be glad to know you've made a dem' ass of yourself—if you really are going to Biskra."

"Praise for Sir Hubert—"

"Oh, don't you think I mind giving you a twelve-hour start; you won't gain anything by it. Y'see I know where you're going, and I know it's not there. If you'll take a fool's advice, you'll turn back now. You'll come back empty-handed anyway. I don't mind telling you that we mean to have that ruby, Des Trebes and I, and we know where it is. You're only taking needless trouble by interfering."

Truth was speaking from the bottom of the absinthe tumbler. O'Rourke's brows went up and he whistled noiselessly, for he realized that at least Glynn believed what he was admitting. "So that's the way of it, eh? I admire your candor, me boy; but be careful and not go too far with it. 'Twill likely prove disastrous to ye, I'm fearing. . . . But tit-for-tat; ye've made me a handsome present according to your lights, of what ye most aptly term a fool's advice, and 'tis meself who'll not be outdone at that game. For yourself, then, take warning from the experience of one who's seen a bit more of this side of the earth than most men have, and—don't let Des Trebes know ye've talked so freely. He's a bad-tempered sort and . . . But I'm obliged to ye and I bid ye a good evening."

CHAPTER VII.

South of Biskra there is always trouble to be had for the seeking; south of Biskra there is never peace. A guerilla warfare is waged perennially between the lords of the desert, the Touaregs on the one hand, and the advance agents of civilization, as personified by the reckless French Condemned Corps and the Foreign Legion on the other. Year after year military expeditions set out from the oasis of Biskra to penetrate the wilderness, either by caravan route to Timbuctoo or along the proposed route of the Trans-Saharan Railway to Lake Tchad; and their lines of march are traced in red upon the land.

Toward this debatable land O'Rourke set his face with a will, gladly; for he loved it. He had fought over it of old; in his memory its sands were sanctified with the blood of comrades, men by whose side he had been proud to fight, men of his own stamp whose friendship he had been proud to own.

Mentally serene, if physically the reverse of comfortable, O'Rourke dozed through the interminable twelve hours of the journey to El-Guerrah; arriving at which place after eight the following morning, he transferred himself and his hand-bags (for now he was traveling light) to the connecting train on the Biskra branch. The latter, scheduled to reach the oasis at four-thirty in the afternoon, loafed casually up the line, arriving at the terminus after dark.

The Irishman, thoroughly fagged but complacent in the knowledge that he had left both vicomte and honorable a day behind him, kept himself from bed by maul will-power for half the night, while he made the rounds of cafes and dance halls, in search of a trustworthy and competent guide—no easy thing to find.

The French force by then was three days out from the oasis, and no doubt since it was technically a "flying column," calculated to move briskly from point to point in imitation of Touareg tactics, hourly putting a greater distance between itself and its starting point. Moreover, the pursuit contemplated by the adventurer was one attended by no inconsiderable perils. By dint of indomitable persistence, unflinching good-nature and such influence as he could bring personally to bear upon the authorities, O'Rourke got what he desired—a competent guide and two racing camels, or mehera, with a pack animal that would serve their purpose.

By dawn they were ready to start; and so, in the level rays of a sun that seemed a dazzling sphere of intolerable light, poisoning itself in the eastern rim of the world as if undecided whether or no to take up its flight across the firmament, the little caravan rocked out into the fastness of the desert, the Irishman in the van sitting a blooded mehari as one to the wilderness born.

On the seventh night they

ed hard, on the heels of the flying column, having for seven days pursued it this way and that, zigzagging into the heart of the parched land.

Now, when they were come within six hours of their goal, reluctantly, long after nightfall, O'Rourke gave consent to halt, conceding the necessity; for weariness weighed upon their shoulders a great burden, and the camels had become unusually sullen and evil tempered; if rest were denied them presently they would become obstinate and refuse to follow the road.

O'Rourke closed his eyes and lost consciousness with a sensation of falling headlong into a great pit of oblivion, bottomless, eternal. Yet it seemed no more than a moment ere he was sitting up and rubbing sight into his eyes, shaken out of slumber by his guide.

He stumbled to his feet and lurched toward the camels, still but half awake. When his senses cleared irritation possessed him. His guide had been overzealous. He turned upon the man and seized him roughly by the arm.

"What the divvie!" he grumbled angrily, between a yawn and a chatter of teeth—for the air was bitter cold. "The moon's not yet up!"

"Hush, Sid!" Something in the guide's tone stilled his wrath. "The Touaregs are all about us. They have been passing us throughout the night—"

"Ye knew this and did not wake me?"

"There was no need; we could not have moved ere this without detection. Now, they are all a-stir, and we in the night, may pass for them—until moon-up."

The guide turned away to rouse the mehari, prodding them up, mutinous, snarling and ugly. In another five minutes they were again moving forward. By the time the silver rim of the moon peered over the edge of the east they were pelting on at full speed, as yet, apparently, undetected by the Touaregs.

An hour passed, and the chill in the air became more intense; dawn was at hand. A sense of security, of dan-



He Had Found Chambret.

gers left behind, came to the Irishman; he began to breathe more freely, though still the polished butt of a repeating rifle swinging from the saddle remained a comfort to his palm. He grew more confident, mentally at ease, seeing the desert take shape in the moonlight and show itself desolate on every hand.

Even as he gained assurance from this thought, the guide turned in his saddle and cried a warning: "The Touaregs!" From that moment on both wielded merciless whips. For out of the moonlit wastes behind them had shrilled a voice, cruel and wild, announcing discovery and the inception of the chase. The fugitives had need of no sharper spur.

A rifle shot rang sharp on the echoes of that cry, but the bullet must have fallen far short. A moment later, indeed, they opened a brisk, scattering fire—naturally ineffectual, though the bullets dropping right and left in the sand proved that the chase had got within range.

Even with that warning, the end was nearer than he had dreamed or hoped. It came in a twinkling and as unexpected as a bolt out of a clear sky: a flash of fire ahead, a spiteful snap and ptt!—the song of a bullet speeding past his head.

The guide pulled up with a jerk.

"I've promised, Chambret."

"I am glad. . . . But you—what has brought you hither?"

"I—I wished to see ye."

But the dying ere oftentimes and strangely endowed with curious insight into matters beyond their ken. Without perceptible hesitation Chambret made this apparent.

"You have come for the ruby," he said with conviction.

"How did ye know?"

"It is true, then? . . . I fancied so; I knew that some day you would come to claim it. . . . Bend nearer to me. . . . The Pool of Flame is in the keeping of my good friend, the Governor-General of Algeria. It is all arranged. When I am gone, take my signet ring, tell him your name, and lemand the package—a small morocco-leather box, wrapped in plain brown paper and superscribed with my name and yours. He knows nothing of its value, save that it is great, and will deliver it to you and only you without question. . . . That is all."

The hand that clasped O'Rourke's was like ice.

"Chambret!"

"Beatrix."

man who had died with his wife's name upon his lips.

CHAPTER IX.

Shortly before midnight the tri-weekly train from Constantine to Algiers pulled up over an hour late at the town of El-Guerrah. It took up a single passenger, discharged none, and



They Had Literally Caught Him Napping.

presently thundered on westwards, rocking and jarring over a road-bed certainly no better than it should have been. Such, at least, was the passenger's criticism, as, groaning in anticipation of the long night of discomfort ahead of him, he disposed himself and his belongings about the cushions of the first-class compartment which he occupied in solitary grandeur.

O'Rourke had no intention of leaving anything undone that might tend to mitigate the terrors of the journey.

Five days had elapsed since that morning in the oasis. In the interval he had again dared the danger of the desert, returning to Biskra alone by a route more direct than that which had brought him up with the flying column. Discharging the guide with a gratuity larger than his ebbing means warranted, he had proceeded to El-Guerrah by the first daily train, and so now found himself on the direct line of communication with Algiers and the Governor-General.

His chiefest concern now lay with the future and the Pool of Flame; both bulked large upon the horizon and were at once the architects and the nuclei of a thousand different plans of action.

So far, the affair had worked smoothly; he anticipated little trouble.

So thinking he dozed, and in the course of time lulled by the hammering of a flat-wheel at the forward end of the coach, fell asleep. He wakened suddenly after a nap of some two hours or so, to a confusion of impressions: that the train had stopped; that some one had invaded his compartment; that a cold blast was blowing across his senses, he started up and fell back with a thud, assisted to resume a recumbent position by a heavy blow upon his chest, delivered by some person for the moment unknown. Simultaneously he was aware of a clicking sound, followed by the sensation of being unable to move his feet; and then, the clouds clearing from his understanding, he realized that the cold upon his wrists was that of steel. With handcuffs also on his ankles, he lay helpless, unable even to protest because of a cloth wadded tightly into his mouth and a firm hand that prevented ejection.

Other hands were rifling his pockets, swiftly but after a bungling fashion. The train, having paused briefly at Self (he afterwards located the station by conjecture), began to move again, was presently in full thundering flight. Abruptly the examination of his person—which was so thorough that it included the opening of his shirt to assure the thieves that he carried nothing in the shape of a money-belt—was concluded and the adventurer was roughly jerked into a sitting position. At the same time his gag was removed.

He gasped, blinked, coughed, and rolled a resentful eye around the compartment. "Be the powers!" he said huskily, and no more. At first glance it became apparent that he had miscalculated the audacity and resource

O'Rourke, reining in desperately, swung his camel wide to avert the threatened collision. Simultaneously the sharp "Qui vive?" of a French sentry rang out, loud and sweet to hear.

"Thank God!" said the adventurer in his heart. And aloud, "Friends!" he cried, driving past the sentry in a cloud of dust.

By a blessed miracle the man was quick of wit, and swift to grasp the situation—of which, however, he must have had some warning from the rattle of firing. He screamed something in O'Rourke's ear as the latter passed, and turning threw himself flat and began to pump the trigger of his carbine, emptying the magazine at the on-sweeping line of Touaregs.

(To be continued)

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