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Then I'll Come Back to You

By LARRY EVANS
Author of "Once to Every Man"

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SYNOPSIS

Caleb Hunter and his sister Sarah welcome to their home Stephen O'Mara, a homeless and friendless boy, starting from the wilderness to see the city.

Stephen O'Mara catches a glimpse of Barbara Allison. The girl is rich. The O'Mara boy falls in love with her. She is ten, he fourteen.

The boy and girl are in a party that go to town. The old people watch with concern the youth's growing attachment for the girl.

Caleb is much impressed with the boy's ideas on the moving of timber. He predicts a great future for the lad.

O'Mara whips Archibald Wickersham in a boyhood fight over Barbara. She takes Wickersham's side, and Stephen leaves for parts unknown, saying, "I'll come back to you."

Years later the boy returns as a man. He is a contractor. Sarah welcomes him. Barbara is a beautiful woman.

O'Mara suspects there is a plot to prevent his successful completion of a railroad and that Barbara Allison's father and Wickersham are in it.

(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

"Not all my friends," his slow voice drawled at last, but even the words were tinged with doubt. "Not all my friends," he said. Silently the man reached out and found the hand which had lain for a moment upon his arm.

"So you are—you," he murmured, when his fingers touched hers. "I wasn't—just sure."

Suddenly unable to think quite clearly, Barbara wondered at the new pulse in her throat, which beat and beat as if it seemed not easy even to speak.

"Then it—must be you too," she faltered. "I wasn't sure, either, even when I knew it must be. I'd begun to believe that you hadn't forgotten—that you didn't care to . . . Will you please say that you forgive me—please for something over which I have been sorrier than you can know?"

His eyes clung to the velvety face of that slim girl decked as Cinderella in bits of transparent slippers and shimmering, star edged white, until even in spite of the gloom the girl recognized the change which had come creeping over his face. She saw it surge up in his eyes—the old undisguised wonder of the boy of ten years before, for which, until that instant, she had looked in vain—but it was a man's wonder of woman now, utter and absolute and all enveloping. She caught her breath then. She touched her lips with a faint tongue as though they had gone dry of a sudden. Involuntarily she stepped toward him, that single pace which she had fallen away. And above the tumult of her own senses she heard herself trying to laugh and realized how unsteady the effort was.

"Then you do forgive me?" she breathed. "Do I—pass inspection? Do you like me—in my masquerade?"

"There was never need of a fatry godmother for you," he told her, his voice grave. "There was never need of a transforming miracle. You have been that always yourself. And you are not permitted to ask forgiveness from me nor pardon. Men do not admit that there can be need of that where they have worshipped as long as I have worshipped you. You knew I was coming. I've been coming ten years now. But you can never know either how long ten years can be."

The words were blurred as a far off echo in her ears. She started to speak, but all that she would have said caught in her throat and hurt her, and only her unsteady breath came from parted lips. But when at her inarticulate effort at speech he bent his head to her swiftly upflung face her whole slender body tightened at the rough contact of blue flannel against her cheek. Almost before they held her she struggled madly from the circle of his arms. White of face, white of lip, she broke away from him and darted through the gap in the hedge only to shrink back against him in panic the next instant before the black shape upon a blacker horse between her and the lights.

He was gazing in their direction—the man upon the horse. He was laughing softly. And when he thrust back the black cowl that hid his face and began to speak Stephen O'Mara recognized that terribly pale, terribly drawn face. Garry Devereau rocked a little in the saddle and waved a gracefully unsteady hand.

"Blessings, my children," he called to the two in the shadow, and his tongue was not thick, but only wavering. "My felicitations. And, even though I know not your identity, still I may sense your fond confusion. And yet why blush, dear unknowns? 'Tis in the air tonight. Even I myself have yielded to spirit of frivolity. Two hours ago I appeared masked in these dingy vestments as Love's Young Dream, but with me the mood has passed. Fellow romancers, you have witnessed a metamorphosis. You are now gazing upon the Wrath of God about to thunder forth upon a coal black charger. I merely paused to bid you haste inside lest you miss the crux of the evening. When I withdrew the Hon. Archie was already searching with bravely con-

cealed distraction for the fair daughter of the house. The hour has struck. It's masks off—masks off from eyes and hearts."

He laughed again. White face whiter still against the background of his somber vestments, debonaire and drunkenly insecure in the saddle, Garry Devereau tore out into the main road and thundered off into the night.

"Is that true?" Steve asked quietly. She made no move to answer.

"Is that true?" his low and gentle voice commanded this time. "You still mean to—marry—him?"

"What I have done tonight I can never hope to explain," she answered, recovering herself. "I can only hope that some day I may cease to despise myself as utterly as you have taught me to at this minute. And since you choose to regard it now as your right to ask that question I'll answer it for you. I mean to marry him. I shall be proud to be his wife."

The light that streamed over her shoulder fell full upon his face. She saw the blood pour up, staining throat and cheek and brow, and then ebb away. She gave him time to answer, but he did not speak, and suddenly she knew what scene of another day he was remembering. Her eyes dropped to her imprisoned hand.

"You are detaining me," she said.

He released her immediately, and yet she did not move. And while she waited he turned and stooped and turned to her again. She stood like stone while he wrapped her fur edged sapphire cloak about her and fastened it close beneath her uptilted chin. He waited, bare of head, in the hedge gap until she had crossed the lawn to the house that lay a sprawling glowworm in the darkness. A tumult of voices leaped out to him when he opened the door—a lilting crash of syncopated melody. And then it was quiet again.

After a glimpse of his chief's eyes that night Fat Joe essayed not so much as one facetious protest against turning the fagged team homeward with scarcely any rest at all. He remained as quiet as that too quiet man beside him.

He fell to whistling later, and almost immediately his thin tenor was rolling ahead of them through the black alleys between the pines, to continue in soulful reiteration until the construction camp clearing loomed up ahead. Suddenly Fat Joe tightened the reins above the fagged team; then he shot forward and laid the whip across their tired flanks as they cleared the breastwork of trees.

Steve's head was jerked backward by the abruptness of their first plunge, and then he saw what Fat Joe had seen a second before. High up on the hillside there was a light glowing from the windows of the shack which served the chief engineer of the East Coast job as office and domicile too. While Fat Joe laid on the whip a man came hurtling past the outlying door, sprang to his feet and, running low to the ground, disappeared into the blackness of the brush. Joe swung the horses up in a galloping curve and with one catlike leap, incredibly light for a man of his chunky build, was down from the seat and crashing through the bushes on the trail of that fugitive whose noisy flight had already become a faint crackle in the distance.

Flame poured from Fat Joe's revolver. Two whiplike reports shattered the night quiet before Stephen O'Mara moved. Then he lifted himself heavily from the seat. Something nuzzled his shoulder while he stood listening to the diminishing tumult of the pursuit, and even before he turned he knew what it was. He paused a moment to stroke the soft nose of the black horse standing there with reins a-trail. It was Ragtime, wet with lather and caked with dust. But even then he was not prepared for the sight which met him when he entered the shack. Seconds must have passed while he stood staring from the threshold, for Fat Joe came puffing back from his fruitless chase in time to see him bend and lift a black robed, lifelessly limp body from the door and stagger with it toward a bunk. Fat Joe's steady flow of profanity, oddly, double vicious in his thin, complaining voice, was checked short. He, too, stood and stared from the doorway—stood and lifted his nose and sniffed.

"Seems to be our night for callers," he remarked, with bad mildness, "and, say, this one's got a peach of a load."

Then Garry Devereau's head rolled over, ghastly loose and slack, and the plump one caught sight of a ragged gash in the senseless man's temple.

"So-o, that's it?" he droned, and his complaining voice was deadly again. "So that's it! But he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't put up a tidy little battle, was he? Funny about that, too, but I could always do my best little jobs of man handling when I was about half over myself."

His pale eyes swept the floor. He pounced forward and recovered a sheaf of blue prints from a corner.

"This, I take it," he muttered, "was what they was arguing about when we busted in. Steve, them's our bridge estimates—and there wa'n't no copies of 'em either. It wouldn't take us more'n two weeks to replace 'em neither—not more'n two precious, priceless weeks. I'm only hopin' now that when our other caller, who seems to want them more than we do, calls again, I'll be here myself to entertain him with tea or somethin'. I'd plumb hate to seem so inhospitable as not to be home, twice hand runnin', to visitors."

"Maybe that was a tidy little battle while it lasted," Fat Joe continued, "but it ain't deuce high alongside this fight we've got on our hands right now. For he's just as near over as I'd care to see a man, unless it was some one I'd a little prefer dead! It ain't that scratch on the head that's got him slippin', either." Joe paused and turned to address Garry Devereau's still white face itself. "You sat in an backed my game like a gentleman



"Blessings, my children," he called to the two in the shadow.

born," he said, "and now I'm a-goin' to play you'n. blue chips and white and yellow."

And while he talked he worked, for it was Fat Joe who gave the orders that night. He called for ammonia, for brandy, for a half dozen drugs from the camp hospital chest, and each of them Steve brought in an automatic fashion that finally penetrated even Fat Joe's professional pleasure in the struggle.

"Friend of yours?" he asked in an interval while they rested.

"A friend," Steve repeated with a tightening of his jaws, and Joe knew what that tone meant.

Before daybreak there came a hour when Garry Devereau lifted himself upon one elbow and opened his eyes to stare half wildly, but very sanely, about the room. His gaze flitted wonderingly from wall to wall before it rested, fearfully fixed, upon Steve's brown face. Instantly he looked away, flinching, and met Fat Joe's voluminous grin—and looked back again, cunningly cautious. Finally he reached out a timid, blue veined, pitifully unsteady hand and plucked at Steve's blue flannel sleeve. And his words were an echo of those which Stephen O'Mara had heard before that night from other lips.

"Then you—are you," he framed the words laboriously. "I wasn't sure—even when I knew it must be."

And Garry Devereau tried to smile his slow smile of sophistry.

"Greetings, Sir Galahad!" he faltered. "And how are you, Steve—and who might your—fat friend be?"

CHAPTER IX.
Doctor and Patient.

FAT JOE leaned over and drew a blanket a little higher across the sleeping man's shoulder, while Steve continued silently to study Garry's face. Even in unconsciousness a faintly crooked smile of skepticism still clung to the lips.

"It was like him," Steve remarked at last very soberly. "Somehow the minute he began to speak I knew it was exactly the sort of thing I expected him to say. The probability of death is a much more amusing prospect to some men, Joe, than the perplexity of living."

Fat Joe flashed a swift, half puzzled glance at his chief's face. He started to ask a question, then scowled and checked himself and turned instead to kindle a fire in the stove of the lean-to kitchen of the cabin. But a half hour later he was still murmuring the last phrase over to himself perplexedly when Steve came leading the horse Ragtime up to the open door. Saddled and with reins a-trail, the animal had been wandering throughout the night about the upper end of the construction camp clearing. At the sound of hoofbeats outside Fat Joe left the stove and the half cooked breakfast he had set himself to prepare.

"So that's the way one of 'em come," he murmured. "I was wondering some. Last night I didn't notice the horse, being a mite too hurried to give ample attention to details, as it were. But ain't—ain't this one of Allison's horses?"

"No, Joe," Steve answered heavily. "He is from Allison's stables, but we have him to thank, just the same, along with Garry, for our blue prints and estimates. It was Mr. Devereau whom he brought up here last night, and in fairly good time, I should judge, too, from the pace at which they set out. Garry turned him into the hill road, and he must have stuck to it blindly until he struck our fork."

And, after a longer pause, "The horse is Miss Allison's own property," he added quietly.

Joe pursed his lips. Instantly at the mention of the girl's name he felt himself better equipped to understand both the lack of immediate action and the seeming preoccupied indifference of his superior which, in the face of the night's developments, would have been otherwise utterly unaccountable that morning.

The probable nearness of him who had gone bounding away empty handed from the lighted shack was of far less moment than the possible identity of the one who had furnished the inspiration of that night raid. And to Steve the need of assuring that tall girl with the vivid lips and coppery hair of Garry Devereau's safety bulked quite as important as did the advisability of seeking immediately an informal interview with Dexter Allison, such as the latter himself had so emphatically suggested.

(To be continued next week)

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