

THE INDIAN DRUM

By William MacHarg and Edwin Balmer

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"CORVET'S SON!"

SYNOPSIS—Wealthy and highly placed in the Chicago business world, Benjamin Corvet is something of a recluse and a mystery to his associates. After a stormy interview with his partner, Henry Spearman, Corvet seeks Constance Sherrill, daughter of his other business partner, Lawrence Sherrill, and secures from her a promise not to marry Spearman. He then disappears. Sherrill learns Corvet has written to a certain Alan Conrad, in Blue Rapids, Kansas, and admitted strange agitation over the matter. Corvet's letter summons Conrad, a youth of unknown parentage, to Chicago. Alan arrives in Chicago.

CHAPTER III—Continued.

She, he saw, was listening like himself, for the sound of Sherrill's arrival at the house; and when it came she recognized it first, rose, and excused herself. He heard her voice in the hall, then her father's deeper voice which answered; and ten minutes later, he looked up to see the man these things had told him must be Sherrill standing in the door and looking at him.

Alan had arisen at sight of him; Sherrill, as he came in, motioned him back to his seat; he did not sit down himself, but crossed to the mantel and leaned against it.

"I am Lawrence Sherrill," he said. As the tall, graceful, thoughtful man stood looking down at him, Alan could see nothing of the attitude of the friend of Benjamin Corvet toward himself. His manner had the same reserve toward Alan, the same questioning consideration of him, that Constance Sherrill had had after Alan had told her about himself.

"My daughter has repeated to me what you told her, Mr. Conrad," Sherrill observed. "Is there anything you want to add to me regarding that?"

"There's nothing I can add," Alan answered. "I told her all that I know about myself."

"And about Mr. Corvet?"

"I know nothing at all about Mr. Corvet."

"I am going to tell you some things about Mr. Corvet," Sherrill said. "I had reason—I do not want to explain just yet what that reason was—for thinking you could tell us certain things about Mr. Corvet, which would, perhaps, make plain what has happened to him. When I tell you about him now, it is in the hope that, in that way, I may awake some forgotten memory of him in you; if not that, you may discover some coincidence of dates or events in Corvet's life with dates or events in your own. Will you tell me frankly, if you do discover anything like that?"

"Yes; certainly."

For several moments, Sherrill paced up and down before the fire; then he returned to his place before the mantel.

"I first met Benjamin Corvet," he commenced, "nearly thirty years ago. I had come West for the first time the year before; I was about your own age and had been graduated from college only a short time, and a business opening had offered itself here. Times were booming on the Great Lakes, Chicago, which had more than recovered from the fire, was doubling its population every decade; Cleveland, Duluth, and Milwaukee were leading up as ports. Men were growing millions of bushels of grain which they couldn't ship except by lake; hundreds of thousands of tons of ore had to go by water; and there were tens of millions of feet of pine and hardwood from the Michigan forests. Sailing vessels, it is true, had seen their day and were disappearing from the lakes; were being 'soddy' many of them, as the saying is, to the insurance companies by deliberate wrecking. Steamers were taking their place. Towing had come in. I felt, young man though I was, that this transportation matter was all one thing, and that by the end the railroads would own the ships. I have never engaged very actively in the operation of the ships; my daughter would like me to be more active in it than I have been; but ever since, I have had money in lake vessels. It was the year that I began that sort of investment that I first met Corvet."

Alan looked up quickly. "Mr. Corvet was—?" he asked.

"Corvet was—is a lakeman," Sherrill said.

Alan sat motionless, as he recollected the strange exaltation that had come to him when he saw the lake for the first time. Should he tell Sherrill of that? He decided it was too vague, too indefinite to be mentioned; no doubt any other man used only to the prairie might have felt the same.

"He was a shipowner, then," he said.

"Yes; he was a shipowner—not, however, on a large scale at that time. He had been a master, sailing ships which belonged to others; then he had sailed one of his own. He was operating then, I believe, two vessels; but with the boom times on the lakes,

his interests were beginning to expand. I met him frequently in the next few years, and we became close friends."

Sherrill broke off and stared an instant down at the rug. Alan bent forward; he made no interruption but only watched Sherrill attentively.

"Between 1880, when I first met him, and 1895, Corvet laid the foundation of great success; his bouts seemed lucky, men liked to work for him, and he got the best skippers and crews. There was a saying that in storm a Corvet ship never asked help; it gave it; certainly in twenty years no Corvet ship had suffered serious disaster. Corvet was not yet rich, but unless accident or undue competition intervened, he was certain to become so. Then something happened."

Sherrill looked away at evident loss how to describe it.

"To the ships?" Alan asked him.

"No; to him. In 1898, for no apparent reason, a great change came over him."

"In 1898?"

"That was the year."

Alan bent forward, his heart throbbing in his throat. "That was also the year when I was brought and left with the Weltons in Kansas," he said.

Sherrill did not speak for a moment. "I thought," he said finally, "it must have been about that time; but you did not tell my daughter the exact date."

"What kind of change came over him that year?" Alan asked.

Sherrill gazed down at the rug, then at Alan, then past him. "A change in his way of living," he replied. "The Corvet line of boats went on expanded; interests were acquired in other lines; and Corvet and those allied with him swiftly grew rich. But in all this great development, for which Corvet's genius and ability had laid the foundation, Corvet himself ceased to take active part. He took into partnership, about a year later, Henry Spearman, a young man who had been merely a mate on one of his ships. This proved subsequently to have been a good business move, for Spearman had tremendous energy, daring, and enterprise; and no doubt Corvet had recognized these qualities in him before others did. Since then he has been ostensibly and publicly the head of the concern, but he has left the management almost entirely to Spearman. The personal change to Corvet at that time is harder for me to describe to you."

Sherrill halted, his eyes dark with thought, his lips pressed closely together; Alan waited.

"When I saw Corvet again, in the summer of '98—I had been South during the latter part of the winter and East through the spring—I was impressed by the vague but, to me, alarming change in him. I was reminded, I recall, of a friend I had had in college who had thought he was in perfect health and had gone to an examiner for life insurance and had been refused, and was trying to deny to himself and others that anything could be the matter. But with Corvet I knew the trouble was not physical. The next year his wife left him."

"The year of—?" Alan asked.

"That was 1897. There was no question of their understanding and affection up to the very time she so

strangely left him. She died in France in the spring of 1910, and Corvet's first information of her death came to him through a paragraph in a newspaper."

Alan had started; Sherrill looked at him questioningly.

"The spring of 1910," Alan explained, "was when I received the bank draft for fifteen hundred dollars."

Sherrill nodded; he did not seem surprised to hear this; rather it appeared to be confirmation of something in his own thought.

"Following his wife's leaving him," Sherrill went on, "Corvet saw very

little of any one. He spent most of his time in his own house; occasionally he lunched at his club, at rare intervals, and always unexpectedly, he appeared at his office. I remember that summer he was terribly disturbed because one of his ships was lost. The Corvet record was broken; a Corvet ship had appealed for help; a Corvet vessel had not reached port. . . . And later in the fall, when two dockhands were washed from another of his vessels and drowned, he was again greatly wrought up, though his ships still had a most favorable record. In 1902 I proposed to him that I buy full ownership in the vessels I partly controlled and ally them with those he and Spearman operated. Since then, the firm name has been Corvet, Sherrill, and Spearman."

"Our friendship had strengthened and ripened during those years. The intense activity of Corvet's mind, which as a younger man he had directed wholly to the shipping, was directed, after he had isolated himself in this way to other things. He took up almost feverishly an immense number of studies—strange studies most of them for a man whose youth had been almost violently active and who had once been a lake captain. I can not tell you what they all were—geology, ethnology, nearly a score of subjects; he corresponded with various scientific societies; he has given almost the whole of his attention to such things for about twenty years. But he has made very few acquaintances in that time, and has kept almost none of his old friendships. He has lived alone in the house on Astor street with only one servant—the same one all these years."

"The only house he has visited with any frequency has been mine. He has always liked my wife; he had—he has a great affection for my daughter, who, when she was a child, ran in and out of his home as she pleased. My daughter believes now that his present disappearance—whatever has happened to him—is connected in some way with herself. I do not think that is so."

Sherrill broke off and stood in thought for a moment; he seemed to consider, and to decide that it was not necessary to say anything more on that subject.

"Is there anything in what I have told you which makes it possible for you to recollect or to explain?"

Alan shook his head, flushed, and then grew a little pale. What Sherrill told him had excited him by the coincidences it offered between events in Benjamin Corvet's life and his own; it had not made him "recollect" Corvet, but it had given definiteness and direction to his speculations as to Corvet's relation to himself.

Sherrill drew one of the large chairs nearer to Alan and sat down facing him. He felt in an inner pocket and brought out an envelope; from the envelope he took three pictures, and handed the smallest of them to Alan. As Alan took it, he saw that it was a tintype of himself as a round-faced boy of seven.

"That is you?" Sherrill asked.

"Yes; it was taken by the photographer in Blue Rapids."

"And this?"

The second picture, Alan saw, was one that had been taken in front of the barn at the farm. It showed Alan at twelve, in overalls and barefooted, holding a stick over his head at which a shepherd dog was jumping.

"Yes; that is Shep and I, Mr. Sherrill. It was taken by a man who stopped at the house for dinner one day; he liked Shep and wanted a picture of him; so he got me to make Shep jump, and he took it."

"Doesn't it occur to you that it was your picture he wanted, and that he had been sent to get it? I wanted your verification that these earlier pictures were of you, but this last one is easily recognizable."

Sherrill unfolded the third picture; it was larger than the others and had been folded across the middle to get it into the envelope. Alan leaned forward to look at it.

"That is the University of Kansas football team," he said. "I am the second one in the front row; I played end my junior year and tackle when I was a senior. Mr. Corvet—?"

"Yes; Mr. Corvet had these pictures. They came into my possession day before yesterday, the day after Corvet disappeared; I do not want to tell just yet how they did that."

Alan's face, which had been flushed at first with excitement, had gone quite pale, and his hands, as he clenched and unclenched them nervously, were cold, and his lips were very dry. He could think of no possible relationship between Benjamin Corvet and himself, except one, which could account for Corvet's obtaining and keeping these pictures of him through the years.

"I think you know who I am," Alan said.

"You have guessed, if I am not mistaken, that you are Corvet's son."

The color flamed to Alan's face for an instant, then left it paler than before. "I thought it must be that way," he answered; "but you said he had no children."

"Benjamin Corvet and his wife had no children."

"I thought that was what you meant." A twinge twisted Alan's face; he tried to control it but for a moment could not.

"Do not misapprehend your father," Sherrill said quietly. "I cannot prevent what other people may think when they learn this; but I do not share such thoughts with them. There is much in this I cannot understand; but I know that it is not merely the result of what others may think it—of a wife in more ports than one, as you will hear the lakemen put it. What lies under this is some great misadventure which had changed and frustrated all your father's life."

Sherrill crossed the room and rang for a servant.

"I am going to ask you to be my guest for a short time, Alan," he announced. "I have had your bag carried to your room; the man will show you which one it is."

Alan hesitated; he felt that Sherrill had not told him all he knew—that there were some things Sherrill purposely was withholding from him; but he could not force Sherrill to tell more than he wished; so after an instant's irresolution, he accepted the dismissal.

Sherrill walked with him to the door, and gave his directions to the servant; he stood watching, as Alan and the man went up the stairs. Then he went back and seated himself in the chair Alan had occupied, and sat with hands grasping the arms of the chair while he stared into the fire.

He seemed to be considering and debating something within himself; and presently he seemed to come to a decision.

The afternoon had changed swiftly into night; dusk had been gathering during his last talk with Sherrill, so that he hardly had been able to see Sherrill's face, and just after Sherrill had left him, full dark had come. Alan did not know how long he had been sitting in the darkness thinking of these things; but now a little clock which had been ticking steadily in the blackness tacked six. Alan heard a knock at his door, and when it was repeated, he called, "Come in."

The light which came in from the hall, as the door was opened, showed a man servant. The man, after a respectful inquiry, switched on the light. He crossed into the adjoining room—a bedroom; the room where Alan was, he thought, must be a dressing room, and there was a bath between. Presently the man reappeared, and moved softly across the room, unpacking Alan's suitcase. He hung Alan's other suit in the closet on hangers; he put the linen, except for one shirt, in the dresser drawers, and he put Alan's few toilet things with the ivory-backed brushes and comb and other articles on the dressing stand.

Alan wondered, with a sort of trepidation, whether the man would expect to stay and help him dress; but he only put the buttons in the clean shirt and reappeared the dresser drawers and laid out a change of things.

"I was to tell you, sir, Mr. Sherrill is sorry he cannot be at home to dinner tonight. Mrs. Sherrill and Miss Sherrill will be here. Dinner is at seven, sir."

Alan dressed slowly, after the man had gone; and at one minute before seven he went downstairs.

There was no one in the lower hall and, after an instant of irresolution and a glance into the empty drawing room, he turned into the small room at the opposite side of the hall. A handsome, stately, rather large woman, whom he found there, introduced herself to him formally as Mrs. Sherrill. Her reserved, yet almost too casual acceptance of Alan's presence, told him that she knew all the particulars about himself which Sherrill had been able to give; and as Constance came down the stairs and joined them half a minute later, Alan was certain that she also knew.

Dinner was announced, and they went into the great dining room, where the table with its linen, silver, and china gleamed under shaded lights. The oldest and most dignified of the three men servants who waited upon them in the dining room Alan thought must be a butler—a species of creature of whom Alan had heard but never had seen; the other servants, at least, received and handed things through him, and took their orders from him.

"Go back to h—! I'll get you! You—you can't save the Miwaka!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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