

The Fifth Man

By Kathlyn Williams

Dramatized for the screen from novel of James Oliver Curwood

CHAPTER V.

The Girl in the Cage.
I sprang to the cage wherein was confined the loveliest woman I had ever seen. And I sought, madly, with my bare hands, to tear away the thick wooden bars.

"Who are you?" I asked, while thus engaged. "What are you doing here?"

"They have held me here for two years," she cried. "And then, in pitiful supplication, she entreated me to release her."

But the two madmen now leaped on me to drag me away. I fought like a demon. But the negro's spear drew blood in two places in my back and I was obliged to yield to this "superior" force.

The girl's arms—beautifully rounded, bare arms—were outflung through the bars and she ceased not to implore me to save her. But they dragged me roughly away.

The vision of that imprisoned young woman remained before my eyes even after they forced me into the scientist's hut.

I wondered, of course, how she came to be there. And I questioned the mad scientist about her.

"She's my very finest specimen," was all he would say concerning her. "You shall see more of her presently. For you shall have the cage next to hers—if you live."

If I lived? What did this madman mean? I recalled that the cage next to that occupied by the girl contained a mountain lion. Did the madman mean that I was to occupy the cage with the lion? If I lived? Perhaps in his mind was the same thought, namely, that a man and a mountain lion cannot occupy the same cage and both still live. If I lived? I felt that either the lion or John Gaunt was doomed.

The scientist, El Toro, and the black man, Chacha, now produced food. They gave me some hunks of meat, evidently the meat of some wild bird. I ate ravenously. The black man brought water and I drank. And then, strengthened by a full stomach, I began to think of means of escape. Suppose I were to feign unconsciousness?

What I wondered, would they do while I lay in a make-believe faint? Accordingly, murmuring words to the effect that the eating of food after so long a fast was having a bad effect, I pretended to swoon.

I lay perfectly still but alert. And presently I saw the black man, out of the corner of my eye, lay flat on his back, and very soon he snored. Good! The black man was disposed of. Now what would the white man do?

"The other specimen fainted in the same way," I heard the scientist murmur. "Soon he will recover—and we shall have to feed him well—oh, very well—provided he lives."

I watched him, still playing possum. He arose, took a good look at me so as to make sure that I was really unconscious. Then he crept away—away through an aperture in the grass wall that served as doorway to the adjoining room. He crept into that adjoining apartment with such stealthiness as to arouse my curiosity. What was he doing there? I determined to see what that old insane rascal was up to.

Cautiously I crept to the aperture and peered in. I saw the old man lift a heavy, flat stone, which served, I could see, as a covering for a hole in the ground. From this hole in the ground he took an old-fashioned earthen pot. He dipped his hand into the vessel, but before drawing the hand out again with whatever contents the pot contained he looked all round, as if in terrible fear of being spied upon at his stealthy task. I quickly withdrew from the aperture and waited. Presently I again peered into the adjoining room and saw that the pot contained gold. Yes, nuggets galore were pouring through the hands of the scientist. He viewed the golden lumps gleamingly. And it dawned upon me that here was not only a mad scientist, but also a very insane miser.

The nuggets convinced me, however, that surely enough, as I and my friends had guessed, the mountain rascal contained gold—and free gold at that. For surely the madman did not "mine" for this treasure in the exact sense of mining. He probably found the gold "free" in the rock, in the form of the nuggets he now displayed. It was further evident that he alone possessed the secret of the gold. The black man was in ignorance of the source of the wealth and of this hoarded wealth itself. Otherwise, why should the madman seize upon the moment when the negro slept to examine his secret treasure and gloat over it?

But now another thought came to me. Why did I waste this precious time spying on the old man, when certainly an avenue of escape was open—escape not only for me, but for the beautiful young woman in the cage. With extreme caution now I turned from the aperture and crossed the room, passing around the sleeping negro, and out into the clearing. Like the wind I sped to the cages and to the girl.

"Quick!" I cried. "Help me. Now is our chance for freedom." And I strained like a very Hercules at the bars of her cage.

"Get a strong club," she said. "You can't do it with your hands. The bars are very tough."

I found a big stick which I could

use as a lever, and forthwith I pried apart the bars of the girl's cage. She stepped forth in all her loveliness and ran into my arms as into the embrace of a long-lost brother.

"Save me, oh, save me!" she pleaded. "Let us fly before they discover our escape."

Into the forest we darted, and on and on, till at last she stepped on a thorn and cried from the hurt of it. Her feet were bare, while I was well shod. I thought of offering her my boots. But realizing that they would be so big for her as to be cumbersome and thus impede her progress, I shed my coat, tore it in half and made it into two bags for her feet, holding the bags on by tying them with strips of cloth torn from the coat sleeves. Then on we sped, till suddenly she cried:

"Listen! They are coming!"

CHAPTER VI.

I stopped, and distinctly heard the crackle of twigs behind us and the sound of voices.

"Yes, they are close upon us," I said in dismay.

"But I can't run," she wailed. "I'm so tired—I just can't go any faster. Oh, do go on, and leave me to their mercy."

For answer I picked her up bodily and rushed on with her in my arms. She snuggled to me, her arms around my shoulders—and her face close to mine. And as I looked down into her lustrous black eyes I knew that I loved this strange woman of whose history I knew absolutely nothing.

And this night—blessed night—overtook us. I made her a bed of leaves—and she fell instantly to sleep. All night I lay awake watching her and listening with tense ears for any sound in the forest—for while I knew that our pursuers would discontinue their search for us during the dark-

ness, I knew also that now, in the black night, the forest was filled with other enemies—wild animals.

But morning broke and no sound or sign of wild beast had I heard or seen.

Refreshed by her long sleep, the girl was now able again to travel on her own feet and to travel fast.

"Water!" she cried, at last. "Water. For God's sake, water."

"Yes, I know," I said, my tongue being so thick in my own mouth that I could scarcely speak with sufficient clearness for her to understand. "We must—and will—find water."

And water we found—oh! such a rippling stream in the forest as would have made even the unhappiest of men cry with sheer joy. And I was far from unhappy. I felt that we had outdistanced our pursuers—felt sure that we had thrown them off our trail.

It was not that alone, however, that made me so happy now, as I stooped at the stream and scooped up some water in the hollow of my hands for her drink. The greatest cause of my happiness was—the girl herself. I, John Gaunt, had been able to rescue this splendid creature from captivity in a most terrible form. And I loved her, loved her with a love that would never die, loved her beyond all human understanding.

"Can't we rest here awhile?" she asked, pleadingly. "Surely we are safe from that awful old man and his black man—now."

"Yes, and while we rest," I said, "tell me who you are."

Her hair streamed down over her exquisitely formed shoulders—a black, silken cataract. It was jet black, and how she managed to keep it in such splendid condition—so much of it—I could not then even guess.

"No," she said. "Tell me first about yourself. How came you to be at the mercy of that dreadful old man?"

I told her—told her my story from the start to that present moment. And then she volunteered the facts concerning her own sad plight.

"My father," she said, "was a ship owner. We lived in Norfolk, Virginia. My father met with financial losses and was at last reduced to the ownership of but one vessel—a fine sailing ship. To save money, too, he decided now that he would go to sea as the captain of his own vessel, instead of hiring a master as he had always done hitherto."

"Father," I said, when he was preparing for his last voyage, 'won't you take me with you?'"

"He at last, reluctantly consented, saying:

"Since you are all I have in the world—you and my ship—yes, I will take you."

"And so we sailed out of Norfolk on that fatal voyage. My father was now happy because I was on board. But frequently during the long watches on the way down to the Central American coast, he would speak of a presentiment of evil—a presentiment which he could not shake off."

Here she broke down and wept—and I consoled her the best I knew how, stroking her beautiful tresses with loving hand and speaking encouraging words.

"And then," she continued, "came the gale. Oh, such a gale as even my father had never known before. He called it a hurricane. And while the waves were beating across the ship—we struck. We had hit a sunken reef after having been driven by the terrific wind miles out of our course."

The ship was sinking—fast, oh so fast! The last I saw of my father was as we stood at the rail together. Man after man was washed overboard before our very eyes.

"It is my duty," he said, "to throw you into the sea. Look! There is a spar. It will support but one person. You must be the person whom that spar may save. Farewell!"

"With a look of mortal anguish my father—desperate, and having no thought but to save me—hurled me into the sea—flung me directly by the spar so that I immediately seized it and clung to it.

"A wave carried me at once away from the side of the vessel—and then, oh the horror of it!—I saw the ship disappear in the sea and my father, of course, went down with it."

"You will hardly believe me—unless you are acquainted with these tropical seas—when I tell you that the gale—the hurricane—died away almost as suddenly as it had come, and I found myself floating on a quiet sea—the water becoming quickly as tranquil as a lake."

"But how long could I hold on to that spar, how long survive without water or food, I wondered. I managed to get astride of the spar—and for the first time I now looked toward the horizon. And there—surely what I saw was land. Yes, the reef which the ship had struck was off the coast of this region from which we are now trying to escape—not half a mile from the shore."

"Making desperate efforts—the best I knew how—I propelled that spar through the water, slowly, but yet surely, toward the shore, and toward surefall I was within sight of the natives on the beach. They swam out to me and brought me to the shore of the land wherein I was to know so much suffering."

"They carried me immediately to a hut at the edge of the little fishing village. I heard them saying, on the way:

"For there lives the senior from America—the only American here. And this senorita says she is an Americano. So she will be safe with the aged senor."

"The aged senor" proved to be none other than the old madman whom you now know as Senior El Toro. With him lived the same negro, whom you know as Chacha—the old man's servant. The fisherwomen of the village put me to bed in the old man's hut and left me. The old man was very kind to me, for at that time he positively was not mad. Neither was his servant, Chacha. For two weeks the old man nursed me and Chacha waited on me hand and foot—till I recovered my health and was once more as strong as ever in my life.

"It was then that I said to the old man: 'Senior, could you help me to get back to my country—to the States?'"

"The United States!" he said, speaking in a tone of horror. "Why should anybody wish to go to the United States—land of trouble and sorrow?"

"He was in the incipient stage of madness then—but I did not know it. He told me of his life. It seems that he loved his daughter more than life itself—loved her to the exclusion of all else in the world. He was at that time a naturalist employed in an important position by the museum of natural history. And one night when he returned home from his work he found the daughter gone—gone, she said not where. She had left a note saying that she had gone away with a certain man whom she loved. And from that day forth the old man never again heard from the runaway daughter."

"The blow dealt by that heartless daughter so distracted the old man that he felt that he might go insane from grief. He accordingly packed up, withdrew his savings from the bank all in gold pieces and took a ship for Central America."

"He arrived at the little fishing settlement on the coast, of which I have already told you. There he engaged Chacha as his servant and settled down to the quiet, uneventful life practically of a beachcomber—but a beachcomber with money. For the old man had much of gold—gold which he kept buried and of which he never spoke to a human being, and which he never spent."

"For years he lived in that village gathering 'specimens' found in the adjacent forest. All these specimens consisted of skulls and bones of wild animals and of birds which he found dead and which, using his skill as a taxidermist, he would stuff and mount. And it was amid these specimens in his hut, with his servant Chacha, that I came to him—a castaway."

"A few days after that on which I asked him to help me to get back to the States he suddenly said to me, in a half-wild way:

"You look exactly like my daughter. At least you resemble her so thoroughly that you could pass for her. You are not my daughter, are you?"

"This wild speech frightened me, but only vaguely. I did not comprehend that madness was even then creeping upon him."

"No," I said, "I am not your daughter. When can you help me to get back to my own country?"

"Wait!" he said. "You must wait." And a cunning light came into his eyes."

CHAPTER VII.

The Madman's Flight.

"Another day," the girl said, continuing her story, "I happened to enter the hut unexpectedly. The old man thought I was strolling on the beach, and he believed that Chacha, at that hour, was in the village securing food supplies. But Chacha entered right behind me. We both glanced into the bedroom where the old man slept. And what we both saw—both Chacha and I—was this—the old man was sitting by a table with a little chest lying before him. From this chest he was taking handfuls of golden coins and pouring them through his fingers, gloating over them the while like a miser."

"Seeing this, the negro, Chacha, turned and tiptoed out of the hut. But there was an evil grin on his face. I wondered what it meant. I wondered, too, why Chacha tiptoed out of the hut, pretending, for my benefit, that he had not seen the gold."

"The old man now heard my heels click on the board floor in the sitting room. With a wild cry he sprang up and slammed the bedroom door in my face."

"Presently he came from the bedroom rubbing his hands as if with great satisfaction. And the look of the miser gloating over his secret hoard was still upon his face."

"Ah, daughter," he said. "Did you say you were my daughter?"

"This speech alone should have made me know that the old man was fast losing his reason. But I tell you that at that time I did not suspect that he was going mad—did not dream of such a thing."

"Once again I said to him, 'Senior, won't you please help me to get to my own country?'"

"And to my astonishment he replied: 'Help you? You mean pay your passage to the United States? Why, how can I? I am poor. I have no money—no, not one centavo other than we need for our bread and butter.'"

"Now, I knew this was a lie. I knew that he had plenty of golden coins in his bedroom—enough gold, surely, to pay my passage on the finest steamer afloat. Instinctively I felt that I must not let him know that I had seen that gold. I feared that, if I told him I knew of that secret hoard, he might drive me out of his house altogether and place me at the mercy and on the bounty of the Spanish-American natives. So I did not contradict him, spoke no word of my knowledge of his gold. And now he came close to me and pointed a long, bony finger at me, saying:

"I believe you are my daughter, after all. Yes, you are my daughter. When you were a child you fell and struck the fender in our living-room. The scar resulting from the wound you then received is on your shoulder now. Let me show it to you—to prove that you are my daughter."

"No!" I cried. "I am not your daughter. I have no such scar."

"He seized me roughly and tore open my waist and searched my shoulder—searched in vain for the scar he had declared was there."

"God in heaven!" he now cried, very wildly. "You are not my daughter after all. No, not my daughter. But—all the same you are a specimen—a specimen, do you hear?—a specimen of the same species as she. You have been sent to me to keep as a specimen of the same genus as my daughter. Yes, I shall keep you—keep you always—as a specimen. Oh, do not fear."

"I slept—tied to the tree. When I awoke I was alone. But not for long. El Toro and Chacha returned with several burros and pack mules on which were loaded all the household goods which you yourself saw at the old man's hut."

"And now they released me and dragged me through the forest. For days we marched on and on, ever farther into the interior, till at last they reached the clearing where the hut and cages now stand."

"That we had every convenience in the way of utensils for cooking and working, and so on, you already know. All these useful things were brought on the backs of the burros and mules, which Chacha later took back to the village. They built the hut first. Then they built the cage in which you found me. You did not see—but at the back of the cage the old man constructed a wooden pit. This pit served as a sunken bath. They would fill it daily with water for me to bathe and refresh myself. And the old man supplied me with combs and brushes and all toilet conveniences—and—oh, yes, he took excellent care of his 'specimen'—just as he had promised."

"In time they built more cages. I wondered what for. And soon I learned that these new cages were for wild beasts. They dug a pit in the forest, put a rope net in it and then covered up the pit with leaves and limbs of saplings and twigs and grass. And the leopard and lion and all the other animals which you saw in the cages fell into the pit and then were taken alive and put into the cages."

"And so—so passed the days until you found me. That is all."

To be Continued.

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