

The POOL of FLAME

by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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SYNOPSIS.

The story opens at Monte Carlo with Col. Terence O'Rourke, a military man, and a gambler, in his hotel. Looking on the balcony he sees a beautiful girl who suddenly enters the elevator and passes from sight. At the gaming table O'Rourke notices two men watching him. One is the Hon. Des Trebes, with his companion, the Viscount de Trebes, a duelist. The viscount tells him the French government has directed him to O'Rourke as a man who would undertake a secret mission. At his apartment, O'Rourke, who had agreed to undertake the mission, finds a mysterious letter. The viscount arrives, hands a sealed package to O'Rourke, who is not to open it until on the ocean. A pair of jolly slippers are seen protruding from under a doorway curtain. The Irishman finds the owner of the mysterious feet to be his wife, Beatrice, from whom he had run away a year previous. They are reconciled, and opening the letter he finds that a Raunson law firm offers him 20,000 pounds for a jewel known as the Pool of Flame and left to him by a dying friend, but now in keeping of one named Chambret in Algeria.

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

"That the man will never consent to weapons worthy the name. He values his precious hide too highly, and he's not going to put himself in the way of being injured when he has the Pool of Flame to steal. Be easy on that score, darling—and have faith in me a little. I'll not let him harm me by so much as a scratch."

"Ah, but how can I tell? Dearest, my dearest, why not give it up—not the deal alone, but all this life of roaming and adventure that keeps us apart? Am I not worth a little sacrifice? Is my love not recompense enough for the loss of your absolute independence? Listen, dear, I have thought of something; I will make you independent, I will settle upon you all that I possess. I—"

"Faith, and I know ye don't for an instant think I'd dream of accepting that!"

"But give it up. What is the world's esteem when you have me to love and honor you? . . . Come to me, Terence. I need you—I need you desperately. I need the protection of your arm as well as your name. I need my husband!"

"Will," he said gently; "sweetheart, promise ye I will—in ninety days. Give me that respite, give me that time in which to make or break my fortunes. Give me a chance to take the Pool of Flame to Raunson—may, meet me there in ninety days. I will come to you as one who has the right to claim his wife; but if I have lost, still will I come to you, a broken man but your faithful lover—come to you to be healed and comforted. Dear heart of me, give me this last chance!"

With an elderly shriek and a mighty rubbing wind the storm broke over the mainland and a roaring ruff came down.

Impulsively the Irishman turned off the lights, and, lifting his wife in his arms bore her to an armchair by the window.

The storm waned in fury, passed, died in dull distant mutterings. Still she rested in his embrace, her flushed face, wet with tears, pillowed to his cheek, her mouth seeking his.

Vague murmurings sounded in the stillness, sigh—

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 unrepentant air skulked through the town, and finally swung eastward 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 encoiled operator in shapeless and hideous garments; in the topseas its owner, a middle-aged French manufacturer with puffed eyes, a liver, junk 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 mechanician 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 ere 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 to a most matter-of-fact manner. In the body of the machine Monsieur le Vicomte de Trebes, ostentatiously unaware of the advent of the second party, sat twirling rapier-points to his mustaches and concentrating his gaze at 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 proceeding 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 he 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 de Trebes had positively refused to consent to turning a meeting of honor into a massacre. They proposed to substitute regulation French duelling 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, "it's a magnificent glass I need to make it visible to my undimmed eye. What the devil does it carry—a dried pea? What d'ye 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 smiling 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 indecorously 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.

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 de 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. . . . Raunson 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 back ground 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 stouthead young

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 enured 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.

CHAPTER VII.

South of Blakra there is always trouble to be had for the seeking; south of Blakra there is never peace. A guerrilla 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 Blakra 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 Blakra 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 manly 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, unflagging 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 mules, with a pack animal that would serve their purpose.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



GENUINE CHARITY.



De Roads—I'm doin' me best t' relieve th' unemploy'd.
De Burns—Wot are youse doin' fer 'em?
De Roads—I'm tryin' ev'ry day not to git wot.

PIMPLES ON FACE 3 YEARS

"I was troubled with acne for three long years. My face was the only part affected, but it caused great disfigurement, also suffering and loss of sleep. At first there appeared red, hard pimples which later contained white matter. I suffered a great deal caused by the itching. I was in a state of perplexity when walking the streets or anywhere before the public.

"I used pills and other remedies but they failed completely. I thought of giving up when nothing would help, but something told me to try the Cuticura Soap and Ointment. I sent for a Cuticura Booklet which I read carefully. Then I bought some Cuticura Soap and Ointment and by following the directions I was relieved in a few days. I used Cuticura Soap for washing my face, and applied the Cuticura Ointment morning and evening. This treatment brought marvelous results so I continued with it for a few weeks and was cured completely. I can truthfully say that the Cuticura Remedies are not only all, but more than they claim to be." (Signed) G. Baunel, 1015 W. 20th Place, Chicago, Ill., May 28, 1911. Although Cuticura Soap and Ointment are sold by druggists and dealers everywhere, a sample of each, with 32-page book, will be mailed free on application to "Cuticura," Dept. L, Boston.

The New Wife.
Hubby—My dear, won't you sew on a button for me before you go out?
His New Wife—The cook may possibly do it for you. But please bear in mind you married a typewriter, not a sewing machine.

Kill the Flies Now and Prevent Disease. A DAISY FLY KILLER will do it. Kills thousands. Lasts all season. 15 cents each at dealers or six sent prepaid for \$1.00. H. SOMERS, 130 De Kalb Av., Brooklyn, N.Y.

Chance for Him.
Gerald—"People can get used to anything."
Geraldine—Then why not cheer up?

Vofy Far.
"That's a pretty far-fetched story."
"Yes, I got it by long distance telephone."

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

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 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

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 servitor, 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