The Scarlet Plague

By JACK LONDON

(Copyright, 1914, by McClure Newspaper Syndicate)

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

—8—

"Once, when the Chauffeur was away fishing, she begged me to kill him. With tears in her eyes she begged me to kill him. But he was a strong and violent man, and I was afraid. Afterward I talked with him. I offered him my horse, my pony, my dogs, all that I possessed, if he would give Vesta to me, and he grinned in my face and shook his head. He was very insulting. He said that in the old days he had been a servant, had been dirt under the feet of men like me and of women like Vesta, and that now he had the greatest lady in the land to be servant to him and cook his food and nurse his brats. 'You had your day before the plague,' he said; 'but this is my day, and a damned good day it is. I wouldn't trade back to the old times for anything.' Such words he spoke, but they are not his words. He was a vulgar, low-minded man, and vile oaths fell continually from his lips.

"Also he told me that if he caught me making eyes at his woman he'd wring my neck and give her a beating as well. What was I to do? I was afraid. He was a brute. That first night, when I discovered the camp, Vesta and I had great talk about the things of our vanished world. We talked of art, and books, and poetry; and the Chauffeur listened and grinned and sneered. He was bored and angered by our way of speech which he did not comprehend, and finally he spoke up and said: 'And this is Vesta Van Warden, one-time wife of Van Warden the magnate—a high and stuck-up beauty, who is now my squaw. Eh, Professor Smith, times is changed, times is changed. Here, you, woman, take off my moccasins, and lively about it. I want Professor Smith to see how well I have you trained.'

"I saw her clench her teeth, and the flame of revolt rise in her face. He drew back his gnarled fist to strike, and I was afraid, and sick at heart. I could do nothing to prevail against him. So I got up to go, and not be witness to such indignity. But the Chauffeur laughed and threatened me with a beating if I did not stay and behold. And I sat there, perforce, by the campfire on the shore of Lake Temescal and saw Vesta, Vesta Van Warden, kneel and remove the moccasins of that grinning, hairy, ape-like human brute.

"—Oh, you do not understand, my grandsons. You have never known anything else, and you do not understand.

"'Halter broke and bridle wise,' the Chauffeur gloated, while she performed that dreadful, menial task. 'A trifle balky at times, professor, a trifle balky; but a clout alongside the jaw makes her as meek and gentle as a lamb.'

"And another time he said: 'We've got to start all over and replenish the earth and multiply. You're handicapped, professor. You ain't got no wife, and we're up against a regular Garden-of-Eden proposition. But I ain't proud. I'll tell you what, professor.' He pointed at their little infant, barely a year old. 'There's your wife, though you'll have to wait till she grows up. It's rich, ain't it? We're all equals here, and I'm the biggest toad in the splash. But I ain't stuck up—not I. I do you the honor, Professor Smith, the very great honor, of betrothing to you my and Vesta Warden's daughter. Ain't it cussed bad that Van Warden ain't here to see?'

"I lived three weeks of infinite torment there in the Chauffeur's camp. And then, one day, tiring of me, or of what to him was my bad effect on Vesta, he told me that the year before, wandering through the Contra Costa hills to the straits of Carquinez, across the straits he had seen a smoke. This meant that there were still other human beings, and that for three weeks he had kept this inestimable precious information from me. I departed at once, my dogs and horses, and journeyed across the Contra Costa hills to the straits. I saw no smoke on the other side, but at Port Costa discovered a small steel barge on which I was able to embark my animals. Old canvas which I found served me for a sail, and southerly breeze fanned me across the straits and up to the ruins of Vallejo. Here, on the outskirts of the city I found evidences of a recently occupied camp. Many clam shells showed me why these humans had come to the shores of the bay. This was the Santa Rosa tribe, and I followed its track along the old railroad right of way across the salt marshes to Sonoma valley. Here, at the old brickyard at Glen Ellen, I came upon the camp. There were eighteen souls all told. Two were old men, one of whom was Jones, a banker. The other was Harrison, a retired pawnbroker, who had taken for a wife the matron of the State Hospital for the Insane at Napa. Of all the persons of the city of Napa, and of all the other towns and villages in that rich and populous valley, she had been the only survivor. Next, there were the three young men—Cardiff and Hale, who had been farmers, and Wainwright, a common day laborer. All three had found wives. To Hale, a crude, illiterate farmer, had fallen Isadore, the greatest prize, next to Vesta, of the women who came through the plague. She was one of the world's most noted singers, and the plague had caught her at San Francisco. She had talked with me for hours at a time, telling me of her adventures, until, at last, rescued by Hale in the Mendocino forest reserve, there had remained nothing for her to do but become his wife. But Hale was a good fellow in spite of his illiteracy. He had a keen sense of justice.

"The wives of Cardiff and Wainwright were ordinary women, accustomed to toil, with strong constitutions—just the type for the wild new life which they were compelled to live. In addition were two adult idiots from the feeble-minded home at Eldredge, and five or six young children and infants born after the formation of the Santa Rosa tribe. Also, there was Bertha. She was a good woman. Hare-Lip, in spite of the sneers of your father. Her I took for wife. She was the mother of your father, Edwin, and of yours, Hoo-Hoo. And it was our daughter, Vera, who married your father, Hare-Lip—your father, Sandow, who was the eldest son of Vesta Van Warden and the Chauffeur.

"There are only two other tribes that we know of—the Los Angelitos and the Carmelitos. The latter started from one man and woman. He was called Lopez, and he was descended from the ancient Mexicans and was very black. He was a cowherd in the ranges beyond Carmel, and his wife was a maidservant in the Great Del Monte hotel. It was seven years before we first got in touch with the Los Angelitos. They have a good country down there, but it is too warm. I estimated the present population of the world at between three hundred and fifty and four hundred—provided, of course, that there are no scattered little tribes elsewhere in the world. If there be such, we have not heard of them. Since Johnson crossed the desert from Utah, no word or sign has come from the East or anywhere else. The great world which I knew in my boyhood and early manhood is gone. It has ceased to be. I am the last man who was alive in the days of the plague and who knows the wonders of that far-off time. We, who mastered the planet—its earth, and sea, and sky—and who were as very gods, now live in primitive savagery along the water courses of this California country.

"But we are increasing rapidly—your sister, Hare-Lip, already has four children. We are increasing rapidly and making ready for a new climb toward civilization. In time, pressure of population will compel us to spread out, and a hundred generations from now we may expect our descendants to start across the Sierras, oozing slowly along, generation by generation, over the great continent to the colonization of the East—a new Aryan drift around the world.

"But it will be slow, very slow; we have so far to climb. We fell so hopelessly far. If only one physicist or one chemist had survived! But it was not to be, and we have forgotten everything. The Chauffeur started working in iron. He built the forge which we use to this day. But he was a lazy man, and when he died he took with him all he knew of metals and machinery. What was I to know of such things? I was a classical scholar, not a chemist. The other men who survived were not educated. Only two things did the Chauffeur accomplish—the brewing of strong drink and the growing of tobacco. It was while he was drunk, once, that he killed Vesta. I firmly believe that he killed Vesta in a fit of drunken cruelty, though he always maintained that she fell into the lake and was drowned.

"And, my grandsons, let me warn you against the medicine men. They call themselves doctors, travestying what was once a noble profession, but in reality they are medicine men, devil men, and they make for superstition and darkness. They are cheats and liars. But so debased and degraded are we that we believe their lies. They, too, will increase in numbers as we increase, and they will strive to rule us. Yet they are liars and charlatans. Look at young Cross-Eyes, posing as a doctor, selling charms against sickness, giving good hunting, exchanging promises of fair weather for good meat and skins, sending the death stick, performing a thousand abominations. Yet I say to you, that when he says he can do these things, he lies. I, J. H. Smith, say that he lies. I have told him so to his teeth. Why has he not sent me the death stick? Because he knows that with me it is without avail. But you, Hare-Lip, so deeply are you sunk in black superstition that did you awake this night and find the death stick beside you, you would surely die. And you would die, not because of any virtue in the stick, but because you are a savage with the dark and clouded mind of a savage.

"The doctors must be destroyed, and all that was lost must be discovered over again. Wherefore, earnestly, I repeat unto you certain things which you must remember and tell to your children after you. You must tell them that when water is made hot by fire there resides in it a wonderful thing called steam, which is stronger than ten thousand men and which can do all man's work for him. There are other very useful things. In the lightning flash there resides a similarly strong servant of man, which was of old his slave and which some day will be his slave again.

"Quite a different thing is the alphabet. It is what enables me to know the meaning of fine markings, whereas you boys know only rude picture writing. I have stored many books in that dry cave on Telegraph hill, where you see me often go when the tribe is down by the sea. In them is great wisdom. Also with them, I have placed a key to the alphabet, so that one who knows picture writing may also know print. Some day men will read again; and then, if no accident has befallen my cave, they will know that Professor Smith once lived and saved for them the knowledge of the ancients.

"There is another little device that man inevitably will rediscover. It is called gunpowder. It was what enabled us to kill surely and at long distances. Certain things which are found in the ground, when combined in the right proportions, will make this gunpowder. What these things are, I have forgotten, or else I never knew. But I wish I did know. Then would I make powder, and then would I certainly kill Cross-Eyes and rid the land of superstition—"

"After I am man grown I am going to give Cross-Eyes all the goats and meat, and skins I can get, so that he'll teach me to be a doctor." Hoo-Hoo asserted. "And when I know, I'll make everybody else sit up and take notice. They'll get down in the dirt to me, you bet."

The old man nodded his head solemnly, and murmured:

"Strange it is to hear the vestige and remnants of the complicated Aryan speech fall from the lips of a filthy little skin-clad savage. All the world is topsy-turvy. And it has been topsy-turvy ever since the plague."

"You won't make me sit up," Hare-Lip boasted to the would-be medicine man. "If I paid you for a sending of the death stick, and it didn't work, I'd bust in your head—understand, you Hoo-Hoo, you?"

"I'm going to get Granser to remember this here gunpowder stuff," Edwin said softly, "and then I'll have you all on the run. You, Hare-Lip, will do my fighting for me, and you, Hoo-Hoo, will send the death stick for me and make everybody afraid. And if I catch Hare-Lip trying to bust your head, Hoo-Hoo, I'll fix him with that same gunpowder. Granser ain't such a fool as you think, and I'm going to listen to him and some day I'll be boss over the whole bunch of you."

The old man shook his head sadly, and said:

"The gunpowder will come. Nothing can stop it—the same old story over and over. Man will increase, and men will fight. The gunpowder will enable men to kill millions of men, and in this way only, by fire and blood, will a new civilization, in some remote day, be evolved. And of what profit will it be? Just as the old civilization passed, so will the new. It may take fifty thousand years to build, but it will pass. All things pass. Only remain cosmic force and matter, ever in flux, ever acting and reacting and realizing the eternal types—the priest, the soldier, and the king. Out of the mouths of babes comes the wisdom of all the ages. Some will fight, some will rule, some will pray; and all the rest will toil and suffer sore while on their bleeding carcasses is reared again, and yet again, without end, the amazing beauty and surpassing wonder of the civilized state. It were just as well that I destroyed those cave-stock books—whether they remain or perish, all their old truths will be discovered, their old lies lived and handed down. What is the profit—"

Hare-Lip leaped to his feet, giving a quick glance at the pasturing goats and the afternoon sun.

"Gee!" he muttered to Edwin. "The old geezer gets more long winded every day. Let's pull for camp."

While the other two, aided by the dogs, assembled the goats and started them for the trail through the forest, Edwin stayed by the old man and guided him in the same direction. When they reached the old right-of-way, Edwin stopped suddenly and looked back. Hare-Lip and Hoo-Hoo and the dogs and the goats passed on. Edwin was looking at a small herd of wild horses which had come down on the hard sand. There were at least twenty of them, young colts and yearlings and mares, led by a beautiful stallion which stood in the foam at the edge of the surf, with arched neck and bright wild eyes, sniffing the salt air from the sea.

"What is it?" Granser queried.

"Horses," was the answer. "First time I ever seen 'em on the beach. It's the mountain lions getting thicker and thicker and driving 'em down."

The low sun shot red shafts of light, fan-shaped, up from a cloud-tumbled horizon. And close at hand, in the white waste of shore-lashed waters, the sea lions, bellowing their old primeval chant, hauled up out of the sea, on the black rocks and fought and loved.

"Come on, Granser," Edwin prompted.

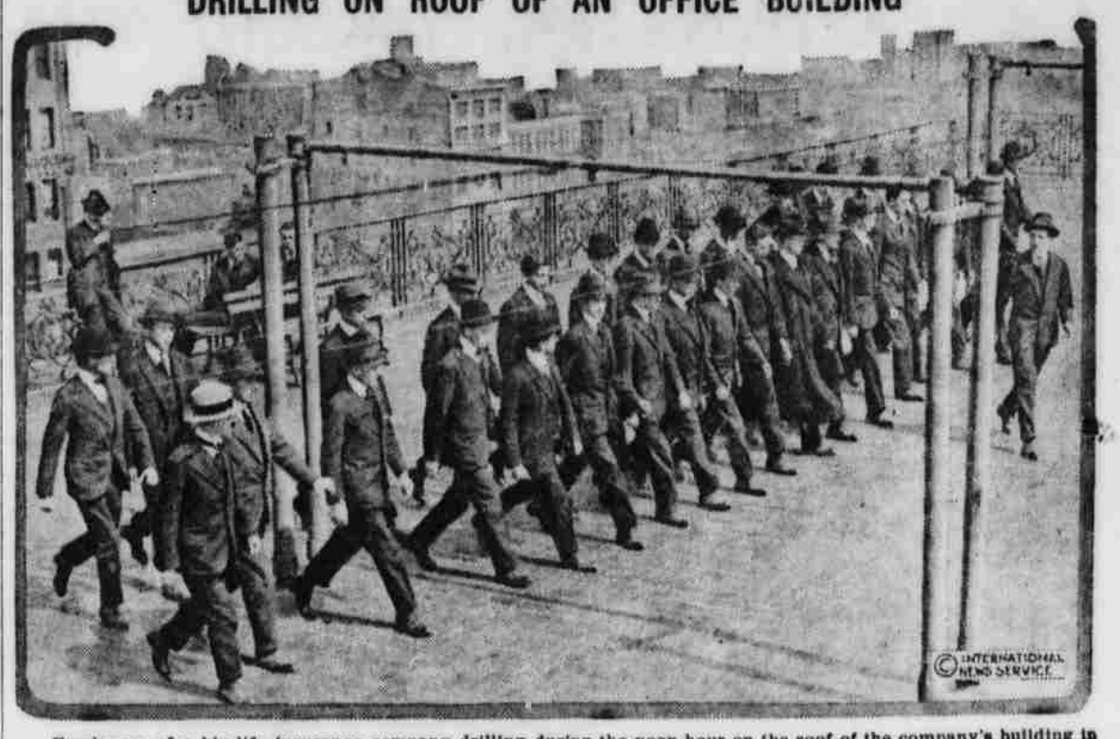
And old man and boy, skin-clad and barbaric, turned and went along the right-of-way into the forest in the wake of the goats.

THE END.

Beavers Becoming Scarce.

In spite of all their intelligence, the beavers are having a hard struggle for existence. They are so eagerly sought by trappers and they have so many enemies among the other four-footed creatures that in America they are threatened with speedy extinction.

DRILLING ON ROOF OF AN OFFICE BUILDING



Employees of a big life insurance company drilling during the noon hour on the roof of the company's building in New York, in preparation for the military training camps of the coming summer.

WOMEN OF WAR-DESOLATED MONTENEGRO

A group of women of the little kingdom of Montenegro, garbed in their quaint national costume. These women have borne more than their share of war's desolation and ruin, and many of them have followed their husbands who are fighting in the ranks, some of them even enlisting and fighting shoulder to shoulder with their male relatives.

LITTLE JESUS PAEZ

This photograph shows one of the women of the hospital at Deming, N. M., nursing little Jesus Paez, the eleven-year-old lad who held Villa's horse during the raid on Columbus. He was so badly wounded that it was necessary to amputate one of his legs.

Old Age.

What is the sign of old age? Collier's Weekly recently ventured the suggestion that it is the wide gap between "I wish" and "I will." The man who has given up the idea of making his dreams come true is on the way to old age.

Here is another angle: Life has a lot of zest and interest to us in youth. We look forward to the next mail, or the next day with pleasurable anticipation. When we no longer look forward and lose our interest in the human spectacle, then youth has faded. It isn't a matter of years, but of spirit.

What She Thought.

"You say," said the lawyer, "you heard this man break into your house in the dead of night, and yet you made no effort to call for help."

"That is so."

"Were you too frightened to call out?"

"No, I was not disturbed a particle. He bumped into the rocker of a chair and swore, so I thought it was my husband."—Detroit Free Press.

LATEST PHOTO OF MR. AND MRS. WILSON

President and Mrs. Wilson photographed as they were leaving Continental hall in Washington, where the president had addressed the Daughters of the American Revolution.

GIRLS CHEER UP WOUNDED SOLDIERS

Pretty high school girls of El Paso, Tex., have formed a club to call on and entertain the sick and wounded soldiers at Fort Bliss. They take flowers and books to the boys and generally cheer them up.