

# Satan Sanderson

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"Hearts Courageous," Etc.

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"If you'd been more decent with spending money," he said with a flare of the old effrontery, "I'd have been all right! Ever since I came home you've kept me strapped. I was ashamed to stick up any more of my friends. And of course I couldn't borrow from Jessica?"

"Ashamed!" exclaimed the old man with harsh sternness. "You are without the decency of shame! If you were capable of feeling it you would not mention her name now!"

Hugh thought he saw a glimmer through the storm cloud. Jessica was his anchor to windward. What hurt him would hurt her. He would pull through!

"Well," he said, "it's done, and there's no good making such a row about it. She's my wife and she'll stand by me, if nobody else does!"

No one had ever seen such a look on David Stires' face as came to it now—a sudden blaze of fury and righteous scorn that burned it like a brand.

"You impudent blackguard! You drag my name in the gutter and then try to trade on my self respect and Jessica's affection. You thought you would take it up yourself and I would be none the wiser! And if I did find it out you counted on my love for the poor, deluded girl you have married to make me condone your criminality. To perjure myself, to admit the signature and shield you from the consequences. You imagine because you are my son that you can do this thing and all still go on as before. Do you suppose I don't consider Jessica? Do you think because you have fooled and cheated her and me and married her that I will give her now to a caught thief, a common jailbird?"

In the thoughts that were darting through Hugh's mind there was none now of regret or of pity for Jessica. His fear was the fear of the trapped spooler who discerns capture and its consequent penalties in the patrolling bullseye flashed upon him. He studied his father with hunted, calculating eyes as the old man turned to Harry Sanderson.

"Sanderson," said David Stires once more in his even, deadly voice, "Jessica is waiting in the room above this. She will not understand the delay. Will you go to her? Make some excuse—any you can think of—till I come."

Harry nodded and left the room, shutting the door carefully behind him, carrying with him the cowering, helpless look with which Hugh saw himself left alone with his implacable judge. What to say to her? How to say it. He mounted the stair as if a pack swung from his shoulders. He paused a moment at the door, then knocked, turned the knob and entered.

There in the middle of the blue hung room in her wedding dress, with her bandaged eyes, and her bridal bouquet on the table, stood Jessica. Twilight was near, but even so all the shutters were drawn save one, through which a last glow of refracted sunlight sifted to fall upon his face. Her hands were clasped before her. He could hear her breathing—the full, hurried respiration of expectancy.

Then, while his hand closed the door behind him, a thing unexpected, anomalous, happened—a thing that took him as utterly by surprise as if the solid floor had yawned before him. Slim fingers tore away the broad encircling bandage. She started forward. Her arms were flung about his neck.

"Hugh, Hugh!" she cried. "My husband!"

The paleness was stricken suddenly from Harry's face. An odd, dazed color, a flush of mortification, of self reproach, flooded it from chin to brow. Despite himself he had felt his lips molding to an answering kiss beneath her own. He drew a gasping breath, his hand nervously caught the bandage, replaced it over the eyes and tied it tightly, putting down her protesting hands.

"Oh, Hugh," she pleaded, "not for a moment—not when I am so happy! Your face is what I dreamed it must be! Why did you make me wait so long? And I can see, Hugh! I can really see! Let it stay off, just for one little moment more!"

He held her hands by force. "Jessica, wait," he said in a broken whisper. "You must not take it off again—not now!"

An incredible confusion enveloped him. His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. Not only had the painful contretemps nonplused and dismayed him; not only had it heightened and horrified the realization of what she must presently be told—it had



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laid a careless hand upon his own secret, touching it with an almost vulgar mockery. It had overthrown in an instant the barricades he had been piling. The pressure of those lips on his had sent coursing to the farthest recesses of his nature a great wave which dikes nor locks might ever again forbid. "What a dear goose you are!" she said. "The light didn't hurt them—indeed, indeed! Only to think, Hugh! Your wife will have her sight! Do go and tell your father. He will be waiting to know!"

Harry made some incoherent reply. He was desperately anxious to get away. His thought was a snarl of tatters threaded by one lucid purpose—to spare her coming self abasement this sardonic humiliation.

He almost ran from the room and down the stair.



## Chapter 6

At the foot of the stair Harry paused, drawing a deep breath as if to lift a weight of air. He needed to get his bearings, to win back a measure of calmness.

As he stood there Hugh came from the library. His head was down, and he went furtively and slinkingly, as though dreading even a casual regard. He snatched his hat from the rack, passed out of the house and was swallowed up in the dusk. David Stires had followed his son into the hall. He answered the gloomy question in Harry's eyes.

"He is gone," he said, "and I hope to heaven I may never see his face again!" Then slowly and feebly he ascended the stairs.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed, and old David Stires re-entered the room, went feebly to his wheel chair and sat down.

"I have told her," he said presently in a broken voice. "You are kind, Sanderson, very kind. God help us!"

"What has God to do with it?" fell a voice behind them. Harry faced about. It was Jessica as he had first seen her in the upper room with the bandage across her eyes.

"What has God to do with it?" she repeated in a hard tone. "Perhaps Mr. Sanderson can tell us. It is in his line."

"Please"—said Harry.

He could not have told what he would have asked, though the accent was almost one of entreaty. The harsh satire touched his sacred calling. Coming from her lips it affronted at once his religious instinct and his awakened love. It was all he said, for he stopped suddenly at sight of her face, pale, frosted, white as the folded cloth.

"Oh," she said, turning toward the voice, "I remember what you said that night right here in this very room—that you sowed your wild oats at college with Hugh—that they were 'a tidy crop.' You were strong, and he was weak. You led, and he followed. You were 'Satan Sanderson,' abbot of the Saints, the set in which he learned gambling. Why, it was in your rooms that he played his first game of poker. He told me so himself! And now he has gone to be an outcast, and you stand to the right in a creaking chair,

the Rev. Henry Sanderson! You helped to make him what he has become! Can you undo it?"

Harry was looking at her with a stricken countenance. He had no answer ready. The wave of confusion that had submerged him when he had restored the bandage to her eyes had again welled over him.

"I am not excusing Hugh now," she went on wildly. "He has gone beyond excuse or forgiveness. He is as dead to me as though I had never known him, though the word you spoke an hour ago made me his wife. I shall have that to remember all my life—that and the one moment I had waited for so long, for my first sight of his face and my bride's kiss! I must carry it with me always. I can never wipe that face from my brain or the sting of that kiss from my lips—the kiss of a forger, of my husband!"

The old man groaned. "I didn't know he had seen her!" he said helplessly. "Jessica, Hugh's sin is not Sanderson's fault!"

In her bitter words was an injustice as passionate as her pain, but for her life she could not help it. She was a woman wrenched and torn, tortured beyond control, numb with anguish.

To Harry Sanderson her words fell with a wholly disproportionate violence. It had never occurred to him that he himself had been individually and actively the cause of Hugh's downfall. The accusation pierced through the armor of self esteem that he had linked and riveted with habit. The same pain of mind that had spurred him on that long ago night to the admission she had heard had started to new life a bared, a scathed, a rekindling sin.

"It is all true," he said. It was the inveterate voice of conscience that spoke. "I have been deceiving myself. I was my brother's keeper! I see it now."

She did not catch the deep compunction in the judicial utterance. She stood an instant quivering, then turned and, feeling blindly for the door, swept from their sight.

White and breathless, Jessica climbed the stair. In her room she took a key from a drawer and ran swiftly to the attic studio. She unlocked the door with hurried fingers, tore the wrappings from the tall white figure of the prodigal son and found a heavy mallet. She lifted this with all her strength and showered blow upon blow on the hard clay, her face and hair and shimmering tress powdered with the white dust, till the statue lay on the floor, a heap of tumbled fragments.

Fateful and passionate as the scene in the library had been, her going left a pall of silence in the room. Harry Sanderson looked at David Stires with pale intentness.

"Yet I would have given my life," he said in a low voice, "to save her this!"

Something in the tone caught the old man. He glanced up.

"I never guessed," he said slowly—"I never guessed that you loved her too."

But Harry had not heard. He did not even know that he had spoken aloud.

David Stires turned his wheel chair to the Korean desk, touching the bell as he did so. He took up the draft and put it into his pocket. He pressed a spring; a panel dropped and disclosed a hidden drawer, from which he took a crackling parchment. It was the will against whose signing Harry had pleaded months before in that same room. The butler entered.

"Witness my signature, Blake," he said and wrote his name on the last page. "Mr. Sanderson will sign with you."

An hour later the fast express that bore Jessica and David Stires was shrieking across the long skeleton railroad bridge, a dotted trail of fire against the deepening night.



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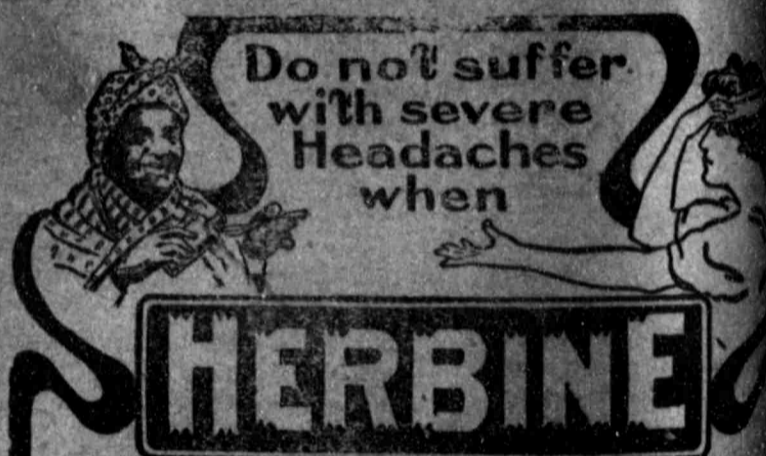
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