

# Satan Sanderson

By **HALLIE  
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Author of  
"Hearts Courageous," Etc.

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## Chapter 21



As Harry made his way down the mountain in the blank and heavy dark, correcting his path by the lightning, he had faced squarely the question that in that dim room had become an imminent demand.

"What if I love her! What right have I to love her, with a wretched name like mine? She has refinement, a measure of wealth no doubt, and I am poor as poverty, dependent on the day's grubbing in the ditch for tomorrow's bacon and flour. Yet that would not stand in the way. I am no venal rogue, angling for the loaves and fishes. Whatever else she cursed me with, nature gave me a brain, and culture and experience have educated it. With hand or brain I can hew my own niche to stand in."

So he had argued, but his argument ended always with the same stern and unanswerable conclusion: "To drag her down in order to lift myself! Because she pities me—pity is akin to love—shall I take advantage of her interest and innocence?"

In the cabin through the long hours till the dawn began to infiltrate the dark hollows of the wood he had lain wide eyed, thinking. When day came he had cooked his breakfast and thereafter sat watching the havoc of the storm through the window. Hours passed thus before the fury of the wind had spent itself. At length he rose, threw open the door and stood looking out upon the wind whipped foliage and the drab desolation of the fog. Then he threw on his mackinaw coat, picked up his gold pan and climbed down the slope. Beneath all other problems must lie the sordid problem of his daily food. He had uncovered a crevice in the bed rock at the end of his trench the day before, and now he scraped a palful of the soggy gravel it contained and carried it back to the cabin.

With a sigh he took off his damp coat and threw a log on the fire. He abstractedly watched it kindle, then filled and lit his pipe and turned to the bookshelf. He ran his hand absently along the row. Where had been that wide, dim expanse of library walls that hovered like a mirage beyond his visual sight? He chose a volume he had been reading and turned the pages.

All at once his hand clinched. He gave a choked cry. He was staring at a canceled bank draft bearing his own name—a draft across whose face was written in the cramped hand resembling the signature a word that seemed etched in livid characters of shame—"Forgery!"

"Pay to Hugh Stires—the sum of \$5,000." He read the phrase in a hoarse, husky monotone, every vein beating fiercely, his body hot with the heat of a forge. There it was, a hideous chapter of it, the damnable truth from which he had shrunk!

Did the town know? He snatched at the draft and read the date. More than a year ago, and it had been presented for payment in a distant city, the city near which he had been picked up beside the railroad track. The forged name was the same as his own. Who was David Stires? His father? Had that city been his home once and that infamous act the forerunner of his flight or exile? He

looked at the paper again with painful intentness. It was canceled, therefore had been paid without question. Yet the man it had robbed had stamped it with that venomous hallmark. Clearly the law had not stepped in, for here he was at liberty, owing his name. He had been let go, then, disowned, to carry his badge of crime here into the wilderness! And how had he lived since then?

He stumbled to a chair and sat down, his frame rigid. He thought of the robbed sluice in the gulch below, of his own unhappy adventure of the night. How could he tell what he had done—what he might do? Minutes went by as he sat motionless, his mind catching strange kaleidoscopic pictures that fled past him into the void. At length he rose and went to the window. Far down the hillside a faint, line through the mist spanned the gulch bottom. A groan burst from his lips.

"That is the hydraulic flume," he said aloud. "Gold has been stolen there in the past again and again. Some was stolen two nights ago. How do I know but that I am the thief? Was that what Prendergast had meant by the 'safe way to beat the game?' A shiver ran over him. "How do I know!" he thought. "I can see myself—the evil side of me—when the dark had fallen waking and active. I see myself creeping down there, stealing from shadow to shadow, to scoop the gold from the riffles when the moon is under a cloud. I see men sitting from dark to daylight with loaded rifles across their knees watching. I see a flash of fire. I hear a report. I see myself there by the sluice boxes, dead, shot down in the act of a thief, making good the name men know me by!"

The figure of Jessica came before him, standing in her soft white gown, her hand against her cheek and the jasmine odors about her. The dream he had dreamed could not be—never, never! All that was left was surrender, ignominious flight to scenes barren of suggestion.

At that instant a shuffling point caught his eye. It came from the pan of gravel on the doorstep, on which the rain had been beating. He thrust the draft into his pocket and seized a double handful of the gravel. He plunged it into a pail of water and held it to the light. It sparkled with coarse, yellow flakes of gold. He dropped the handful with a sharp exclamation, threw on his coat and rushed from the cabin.

All day, alone on the fog soaked hillside, Harry toiled in the trench without food or rest.

It was a fair, sweet evening, and the room where Jessica sat beside David Stires' bed, reading aloud to him, was flooded with the falling sunlight. Since the old man's seizure in the night he had been much worse, and she had scarcely left his room. Today, however, he had sat propped by pillows, able to read and chat, and the deep personal anxiety that had numbed her had yielded.

A knock came at the door. It was a nurse with letters for him from the mail, and while he opened them Jessica laid aside the book and went slowly down the hall to the sun parlor, where the doctor stood with the group gathered after the early supper, chatting of the newest "strike" on the mountain.

"We'll be famous if we keep on," he was saying as she looked out of the wide windows across the haze where the sunlight drifted down in dust of gold. "I've a mind to stake out a claim myself."

"We pay you better," said one of the occupants grimly. "Anyway, the whole of Smoky mountain was staked in the excitement a year ago. There's no doubt about this find, I suppose?"

"It's on exhibition at the bank," the doctor replied, "more than \$5,000 cached in a crevice in the glacial age as neat as a Christmas stocking!"

The talk went on about her.

"Where is the lucky claim?" some one asked.

"Just below this ridge," the doctor replied. "It is called the 'Little Paymaster'."

The name caught her ear. The Little Paymaster? That was the name on the tree—on Hugh's claim! At that instant she thought she heard David Stires calling. She turned and ran quickly up the long hall to his open door.

The sight of his face at first startled her, for it was held captive of emotion, but it was an emotion of joy, not of pain. A letter fluttered in his grasp. He thrust it into her hands.

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"Jessica," he exclaimed, "Hugh has paid it! He has sent the \$5,000, interest and principal, to the bank to my account!"



For a moment she stood transfixed. The talk she had mechanically heard leaped into significance, and her mind ran back to the hour when she had left the draft at the cabin. She caught the old man's hand and knelt by his chair, laughing and crying

"Hugh has paid it!" at once. During these last few days the impulse to tell all that she had concealed had been almost irresistible. Now the barrier had fallen. The secret she had repressed so long came forth in a rush of sentences that left him mute and amazed.

"I should have told you before," she ended, "but I didn't know—I wasn't sure"—She broke down for very joy.

He looked at her with eyes unnaturally bright. "Tell me everything, Jessica!" he said. "Everything, from the beginning!"

"He was young and irresponsible, Jessica," said the old man. "Money always came so easily. He didn't realize what he was doing when he signed that draft. He has learned a lesson out in the world. It won't hurt his career in the end, for no one but you and I and one other knows it. Thank God! If his memory comes back—"

"Oh, it will!" she breathed. "It must! That day on the Knob he only needed the clew! When I tell him who I am he will know me. He will remember it all. I am sure—sure! Will you let me bring him to you?" she added softly.

"Yes," he said, pressing her hand, "tomorrow. I shall be stronger then."

She rose and lighted the lamp, shading it from his eyes.

"Do you remember the will, Jessica," he asked her presently—"the will I drew the day he came back? You never knew, but I signed it—the night of your wedding. Harry Sanderson was right, my dear, wasn't he?"

"I wish now I hadn't signed it, Jessica," he added. "I must set it right! I must set it right!" He watched her with a smile on his face. "I will rest now," he said. And she adjusted the pillows and turned the lamp low.

Crossing the room, she stepped through the long window on to the porch and stood leaning on the railing. The words of the Biblical narrative flashed through her mind: "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off his father saw him and had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." So Hugh's father would meet him now!

Harry had labored, spurred by a fierce haste to make reparation. Till the last ounce of the rich "pocket" had been washed and the whole taken to the bank in the town no one had known of the find. It had repaid the forgery and left him a handful of dollars over—enough to take him far away from the only thing that made life worth the effort.

A gradual feeling of apprehension had come to Jessica—an impression of blankness and chill that affected her strangely. She stood still, frightened at the sudden sense of utter soundlessness.

She caught up the lamp and, turning the wick, approached the bed. She put out her hand and touched the wasted one on the coverlet. Then a sobbing cry came from her lips.

David Stires was gone. A crowning joy had golden his bitterness at the last moment, and he had gone away with his son's face in his heart and the smile of welcome on his lips.



## Chapter 22

DAWK was falling keen and cool, for frost was in the air, touching the fall foliage on the hills to crimson and amber and etching delicate hoar tracery on the spidery framework of the long black

# Your Insurance

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Should your property, burn tonight have you an Insurance Policy that would protect you? One that you could collect promptly without danger of litigation or bothersome "red tape"

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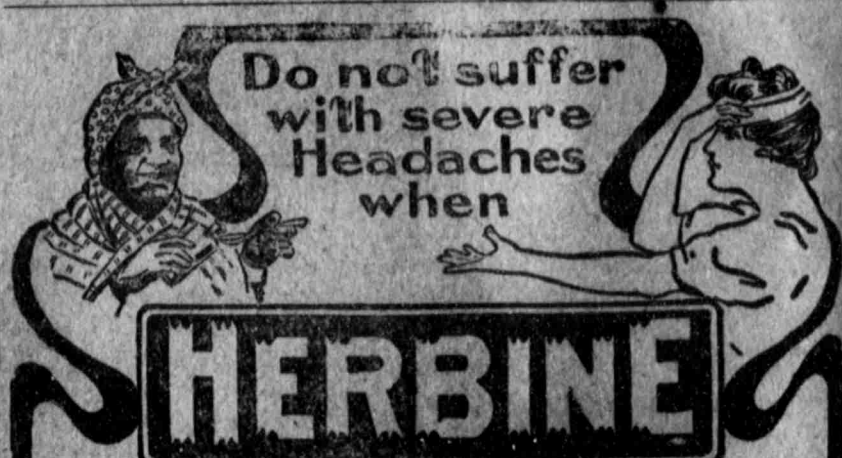
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