

# Power Lot == God Help Us

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### "HE WILL STAND."

It was a drizzly, foggy morning scarcely daylight, when a repeated knocking at my door awakened me.

I cared no more than as if I had been lead—my heart was leaden; my senses, numbed by chagrin and despair, were leaden. It might be afternoon—I might be sleeping over still another tide for all I cared.

The knocking grew more distinct. "Who is there—and what do ye want?" I growled.

"Jim," said a voice, and I started from my bed, for it was Rob's voice, only husky and weak, like the ghost of Rob.

"Drunk!" I muttered to myself. But it was he—Rob—and I sprang to the door and opened it.

Such a sight never saw I before in the gray of the morning. I drew him in, horrified, and locked the door behind us. His hair was matted with blood, his face bruised and caked with mire and blood, his shirt and trousers were in rags, and one hand hung helpless at his side.

"My God, Rob!" said I, and began the work of bathing and binding up his wounds without another word. When I had his face recognizable again, and found that his arm was not broken, only so painfully sprained that it was almost worse, he lay back on the pillows, his lips drawn and pinched with suffering, his eyes sunken like a man's who has been to the grave itself.

"Jim," said he hoarsely, "I never touched a drop. Jim—I give you my word, before my Creator, there was no drink—in this night's business."

"I believe you, Rob. Never mind about explaining now. Rest a bit."

"And—they took my money—every scrap of it."

"What! In God's name—"

"I went—after we parted there—to get the things for Cuby—and I carried them down to the boat—"

"Wait a bit, wait a bit, laddie—let's fix these pillows here. There's time enough, wait a little, now—"

"No—I want to tell you. Then I went back to the town and bought some little trifles—for Mrs. Skipper and Rhody—and I bought half-a-dozen cigars. I'm such a fool of a young one, Jim, I'd had that pleasing my mind and tickling my shopping-list, all the time, how I'd get half-a-dozen prime cigars for you and me to smoke going home."

He smiled, and I let him take his own way for reeling off his yarn, for it was lying heavy on him till it was spoken. He was *there*—Rob, himself—with truth shining like sunlight on his poor, hurt face; and if any degree of the high joy and gush of love and yearning that I felt for him then showed in the smile I gave him back, he must have thought I was a soft one for a son of Neptune.

"And I got them," he went on, "and coming out of the shop—you know how the quarry runs along there—dark—back of the shops—for a ways, along there—I thought, if I could get into an alleyway maybe it would shut off the wind enough for me to strike a match—and light up my old pipe."

"I was holding the match protected in the scoop of my hand—and was leaning forward to light up—when a blow with a loaded club struck me—terribly—on the head—and, Jim, the last thing I saw, and all I saw in that flash as I fell—hush—you come nearer—I saw Bate Stingaree's hand. I know that hand—and I saw it. It was there, Jim, over me—as sure as judgment day—I know that hand—and I saw it."

"The next thing I knew—when I came to—I was lying among the rocks and mire—at the bottom of that quarry; but *where* I was, at first, I did not know. Jim, it was hell—black—dead of night—and one arm no good—only sending tortures through me. I felt the mire around me—and I crawled and

felt the rocks each side; and it may have been—I don't know how long—before the blow came back to me, and the sight, sure, of that dreadful, familiar hand—and I realized that I had been thrown over into the quarry for dead; and if I'd come to half an hour later, the tide that fills up everything would have covered me, too.

"I did not cry out nor call—I thought they might be hiding somewhere about. I tried to climb out, but in the darkness I had to go by feeling, and only one arm to work with—and I'd fall back and have to begin again. How long it seemed down there, Jim, only God knows—till morning came enough so I could see the outline of things—faint—and then I managed to climb up; and I reasoned it out you would be here at the hotel. My body was in agony; but I think that blow—"

Rob actually laughed, and the sunken blue eyes darkened wide with mirth—"I think that blow has cleared my head as nothing ever did before, Jim, and knocked all fear out of me, for big things or little, for evermore. I saw things clear. I limped up here—the janitor and his boy were pottering around gathering some kindling in the sheds, and the back doors were open. I passed in, not caring whether they saw me or not—they did not see me—no one else was stirring. I went up to the slate where they register guests in the office, and found your name and the number of your room—and here I am. God bless you, Jim, it is really your face looking down at me? I thought once I should die there without getting to you. And I'm cleaned out—a pauper again—a penniless, crippled—"

"You are not going to be crippled," said I, "and in a week's time you'll be as pretty as ever. But I'm going out to get some liniment and bandages for that arm of yours. You lie back now and take a nap."

"Since you give me my choice," said Rob, still carrying on by way of a joke, though his teeth were chattering with pain, "I'll wait to take my nap till you've brought something to ease this arm. Say, Jim, it hurts so I can fairly hear it ache. Kite out—that's a good fellow—and hurry up."

I had a doctor there within the next fifteen minutes.

"Better give him a little nip o' something to brace him up while I find out what's the matter with this arm," said the doctor significantly; "he's pretty well run down."

"Oh, you get to work, sir, I don't want any dose," Rob replied impatiently. "I'm game—this isn't a pinprick to what I've been through, soul and body. Only hurry up, please—get to work."

Sawbones looked at him curiously, and stretched the poor arm, and worked it this way and that; and Rob, white as death, with his teeth clenched, never uttered a moan. Relief came presently, though, from the applications the good man put on, and Rob turned over on the pillows and slept like an infant.

I locked the bedroom door behind me, and left word no one was to disturb the occupant there. My purpose was to get to the bank for a couple o' hundred dollars that I meant should go back to Power Lot in Rob's pocket, after all, and to get to the furnishing store for some whole clothes for the lad. I found it was still too early to get admission either to bank or shops. So I crept up the hotel stairs again. I was for all the world like an old bird hovering over a nest. I turned the key softly and took a look at my fledgling. He was sleeping so deeply, free from pain, you could almost see the bliss of his rest in a halo round him. I drew the blinds down, against the sun should rise that far, for it was already making signs of burning up through the fog; then I went out again on tiptoe, locking my tragic young potato-farmer safe behind me.

The wind was beginning to leap up from the north-west a bit, and my heart was taking a swing with it. Rob had been true, and by the miracle of God his bruised body was safe alive. I'd never cease to be grateful for that to my dying day. I went down to my boat and overhauled her, to have all in readiness for sailing if Rob should waken fit for it later in the day. As I went back along Main Street I heard the usual clattering in the restaurant, and the impulse took me to turn in there. By the time I had discussed some breakfast, and put a few observations to the table-girl, the bank would be open and I could get through business and make back to feed and clothe the nestling, who would be eager for trying his wings again as soon as possible.

"Wal," said the girl commiseratingly, "here you be again, all by your lonesome. I guess *he* found the hotel, all right, and hasn't had to use no saleratus to make his drink beady—te-he! He's takin' a good, long nap this mornin', I reckon?"

"That's just where you are mistaken," said I gayly; "he hasn't touched a drop of drink of any kind. *He's* all right."

Her face fell, and she said insolently, "Why doesn't he come and have breakfast with you, then?"

"Oh, he's a swell; he'll take his breakfast at the hotel," I made answer; "he's something rather choice." She set the remaining dishes down very noisily, at my plate.

"You didn't see any other friends o' mine in here yesterday, did ye?" said I, with a bald attempt at being genial.

"You must be a lunkhead," she rejoined, "how do I know who your friends are?"

"Sure. You're right. But, for instance now, a dark fellow, sort of surly acting—wonder if you saw him?"

"Guess he wasn't anxious for your company. Him and another man sneaked in here, soon as you and your 'choice' article left."

"Him and the Frenchman?"

"French or Dutch or Portugee, what do I care?"

"Of course not." I placed a fee for her on the table and spoke lightly.

"They did not say among themselves where they left their boat, did they? She wasn't visible in harbor."

"No," said she shortly. "They acted like a pair of sneaks, and gobbled their vittles, and lit out. Thank ye"—she picked up the silver, but hustled about as though it were my business to be gone. Rob would never have had such brusque treatment at her hands. Little I cared. Rob's vision of the familiar hand as he fell was no hallucination. If the blow had cleared his head, it had mazed and staggered mine.

That Bate mingled some idiocy with his brutality, I knew. But how could he follow us to Waldeck and dine immediately after we did at the restaurant, and expect to go undetected of those incriminating circumstances? Then I remembered the slow, morbid working of his mind, with hate and revenge paramount as a motive; he had meant, no doubt, to "make a good job of it," and by a hand's turn luck might have favored him. A few moments more and the tide would have sucked in over Rob.

If the lad's body had been discovered at ebb tide the conclusion would have been that he had staggered along the quarry edge hopelessly drunk, and had fallen over; his wounds would all have been accounted for by that fact. It was that one glimmer of a masked hand before Rob's reeling senses that fixed the crime at Bate's door. Not only would he have thrown Rob's body to destruction, but the fair name for which the boy had struggled so painfully and long; that would have gone down, too, with the undeserved stigma of "drunkard" at last and of one faithless and fallen,—one who had proven so faithful, who, in spite of every temptation, had stood erect and true.

And one complication of it was that Mary must not know the details of this day's work. To shield and rescue Bate she had spent life and substance. To save him in the end was, after all, her chief earthly ambition. She must not know. I would seek him out by himself, and I would send terror through his soul. He should walk straight hereafter for fear of me. But Mary must not know.

So I did my errands in the town, winning out to this conclusion of the matter, and with the next tide Rob and I set sail for home. It was not till we had clipped past Barstake Island to a fair wind that Rob, fingering over his new jacket with his able hand, found the pocket secured by two rows of pins, just as the old one had been. Blushing and trembling, he worked in and found the roll of two hundred dollars.

"D—n you, Jim," said the boy, in a queer voice that belied the malediction of his words; and he put his head down and sobbed before he could speak again.

"You know what I meant, Jim. You're enough to make a man want to live, just because there is such a one as you to be his friend. But I can't take it, Jim."

"See here," said I, reasonable "there ain't any sentiment about this. I'd give my blood for you, lad, and all I have for you, for that matter. You're true. But it isn't that. We've got to go on, you and I, as if nothing had happened. Mary must not know about this business of Bate's. She never would know from *you*—"

I stopped him, for the splendid loyalty and vindication that blazed in his eyes.

"I know that, Rob. Never would she have known from you. I don't need your word. I would take my dying oath on it, on the Bible, she never would know, from you. But we've got to act this thing out reasonable. You've got to go home to Mary's with your money. And Rob, don't you fret; you'll pay it back to me. I am thinking," I sighed, "it may be easier than you think, now, for you to pay it back to me sometime. That'll be all right. Meanwhile, you and I have got to work together in this business, hand in hand."

"Jim, I'm a great ass of a baby, with my cheap pride, and all; but I wanted to say that first to you—Mary must not know. I've said it over and over to myself times enough. I wanted to say it to you."

"You didn't need to. I knew it of you."

"Jim, if I don't pay it back, it won't be for lack of anything a man-can do, or bear, or deny himself."

"I know, Rob. You needn't to talk."

We went up to the Stingaree house together. I wanted to do that, and Rob let me—Rob, with his face patched up with courtplaster and his arm in a sling. It was night, and for some reasons, we were glad of that.

Well, if I'm anything in line of descent from a wizard, I'm surely mighty soft-born of humanity, too, so far as reading people's hearts from their faces go; and something got settled in my heart for good and all when Mary Stingaree opened the door and met us. Some lives seem, anyway, just to run a predestined course of "giving up," "giving up," and, on any occasion when they wouldn't do it voluntarily, *having* to give up, until it turns by way of being a sort of meat and drink to them! You don't know but there's a fashion of enjoyment of its own goes along with it, like you can acquire a taste for bitter things, and make the best of it, and reckon it's all going to sum up for good somehow, somewhere.

It was not for old Jim Turbine—that look in Mary's eyes; it was not for any thought in her heart for the great doctor; it was a look straight out of her soul, that she could not help, for that big, winsome, tragic-joy of a young man, Robert Hilton.

And the deuce of it was—see what a pair of haggard eyes and a score or so of bruises will do for a fellow!—He was not one bit of a simpleton to her any more. I believe, true, that blow and fall had sent him up instead of down, after all. He was a man glorious from head to foot, a sort of veteran, grave-faced, square-shouldered, plastered up though he was, with his maimed arm; he met her look straight.

"Miss Stingaree," said he, "I met with an accident. But on my word as a man, it was not drink. I never touched a drop."

"I'm witness to that," said I.

"Rob's word does not need any witness," said Mary, very softly, very gently, to us both.

Tears of triumph and joy sprang to Rob's eyes. And I too—well, I was

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