

A Seaside Romance

By Angela Morgan

The Death Trap

By H. Stackpole

"I suppose now that you're back in town you'll lose no time in looking up your goddess of the Beach."

Kimball retorted with a remark which startled the girl, while he carefully flicked cigar ashes into the tray on Brewster's table.

A slow flush mounted the latter's sensitive face. It was a topic which neither had dared to touch upon deviously. When two young men, though the warmest of friends, have been rivals for the favor of a beautiful summer girl it is not unnatural that a certain constraint should exist between them regarding that particular object.

Now that Kimball had made the head, however, Brewster was ready to meet him on open ground.

"That is decidedly my intention," he answered, his glance striking squarely the other's tentative look. Kimball affected extreme absorption in the smoke wreaths curling toward the ceiling. But his attitude did not deceive Brewster.

Eager to be done with simulation he rose to the occasion in a sudden burst of candor.

"Look here, Kimball, old chap, let's be square with each other. I know you intend to pursue this acquaintance with Lola Graham—and I don't blame you. I shall do the same. If she'll let me, I think we both understand each other. It's a fair field and no favors, eh?"

Brewster's unexpected frankness shocked the props of pretense from under the other man. He colored warmly with a suddenness which left no doubt of his real feeling in the matter. But he did not meet the outburst of sincerity with just the spirit that was expected.

After a silence in which he endeavored to regain something of his former indifference he remarked: "I have a suspicion, Jack, that you've the start of me already."

"Why so?" quickly returned the other. "She gave me no more encouragement than she did you. She told me both we might call, did she not? You have her address as well as I."

Fred Kimball relaxed into another silence. When he spoke again he veered to a different phase of the subject.

"Wonder if she and her aunt put up the same appearance here that they did at the Beach? You can't judge people at a resort very well. A pretty, stylish girl may affect all kinds of airs and graces at the sea shore and yet rank among the no-bodies at home, especially when she comes New York at that home. I'm rather curious to see how Miss Graham and her aunt stand the test."

Brewster had been frowning throughout the speech. He detected a certain streak of snobbishness in his friend's make-up.

"I confess to an utter absence of curiosity on that point," he said, somewhat sharply. "No matter what her circumstances might happen to be, Lola Graham herself would atone for all deficiencies."

"Oh, of course," muttered Kimball rather lamely.

It was on the following afternoon that Jack Brewster had occasion to go into one of the large department stores, and in so doing encountered Kimball just coming out.

"Hold on, will you? I'm after something in the book department. Can't you come along?"

Fred obligingly retraced his steps. While threading their way through the crowded aisles both young men halted abruptly at the sound of a familiar girlish voice—a voice which set their blood tingling to the recollection of the summer's experience.

"Mr. Brewster? Mr. Kimball?"

There, near one of the counters, stood Lola Graham, her bewitching smile upturned in greeting. She looked even lovelier than ever in a trim dark skirt and becoming fall-trim waist.

But why—how—what was there strange about her appearance? Something was lacking, Kimball, gazing full upon the glorious gold-brown of her hair was first to realize. She wore no hat!

A sickening apprehension seized him. Why was she standing thus bareheaded, with that air of—Horrors! It couldn't be!

"What can I show you?" asked Miss Graham, brightly. Apparently she was not at all discomfited that they should have made the discovery.

"Nothing just now," returned Kimball, feeling an aching tightness about his mouth. "We were—that is—can you direct us to the book department?"

He needed no such instruction, but he had to say something. He dared not look at Brewster.

Hastening at once toward the elevator Kimball paused and looked back in astonishment to find that Brewster was back, exchanging further words with Miss Graham. He waited with growing irritability and when the other at last joined him remained bitingly. "That shop girl seems to interest you quite as much as the seaside goddess."

An elevator was no place for such a discussion and Brewster, flushing hotly, disdained to reply. After he had made his purchase, however, and the two were again in the street he turned upon his friend with eyes of open contempt.

"I'm ashamed of you!" he said. "Do you know that you acted the

snob to Lola Graham? What has she done to forfeit the right to your courtesy?"

"Look here, Brewster, if you think I intend to humbly with shop girls—pardon me, salesladies—you are completely mistaken. We were both fools not to have recognized the type from the start. If I'm ashamed of anything, it's that!"

Brewster choked back a rush of stinging retorts. When he spoke it was with seeming calmness.

"Lola Graham is to me the same girl as when I first met her. A mere accident of position does not alter the fact of her exquisite womanhood. I shall continue the acquaintance, even as I planned at first."

"Then you asked her just now if you might call?"

"I did and she said yes."

A sneering smile curved Kimball's lip. "I wish you very much joy," he said mockingly.

That very evening Brewster started out to find the address given him by Lola Graham. He caught himself wondering how she happened to reside in a neighborhood which boasted of so many handsome brownstone fronts. However, it was possible that a different part of the street would show a more ordinary class of residences—possibly boarding houses.

But there was the number—119—and it shone over the door of a most unmistakably elegant residence. Utterly dumfounded, he presented his card to the man and entered the luxurious reception room.

Lola's voice in greeting recalled him from his stupefied reflections.

"So you did find us, after all! I'm so glad. Auntie will be down in a moment or so." She gave him her hand in the old sweet, gracious way. Then, meeting the puzzled look in his eyes, her own sparkled with mirth and mischief.

"I see I shall have to tell you at once." And she sat down opposite him, laughing softly in evident enjoyment of the situation.

"Mr. Kimball," she observed with an arch glance, "is not quite so brave as you and does not deserve an explanation. So we will leave him out. He should not be so 'precipitate in his conclusions.'"

Brewster listened, his eyes on her dimpling face.

"This morning," she went on, "I left my hat upstairs in the millinery department, while it was being draped with a new veil that caught my fancy. Not wishing to wait and being in a hurry to get through with other purchases, I went downstairs. There I met you and Mr. Kimball and, thinking to have some fun out of the situation, spoke to you as I did. Then, when I saw that you took the matter seriously, I thought I would let you and thus find out just how much you really cared to pursue the friendship begun at the Beach."

Her bantering manner vanished suddenly. She looked up sweetly and seriously, meeting Brewster's concentrated gaze.

"And you found out?" he said.

"You are sure now, are you not?"

"Yes," she said, "I am sure."

Kimball could have kicked himself for a consummate—well, no matter what—when he heard of the engagement four months later. Miss Graham, the heiress, was quite different to contemplate from Lola Graham, the saleslady. But, then, we all have our lessons to learn.

Washington, Nov. 20. — Clarence Mackay, president of the Commercial

We had been discussing Hegel when Von Arenburg let fall the following profound remark: "Since the beginning of time," said he, "metaphysicians have produced only one fruit—metaphysics."

This set every one making aphorisms apropos of anything of nothing, and excellent some of them were, if I may judge by one I found penciled upon my shirt cuff next morning. It struck me greatly at the time, but I have since forgotten it.

The breeze coming up the Neckar valley brought with it the music of the hand from the castle gardens, and from where I sat the open window showed the river and sunlit Heidelberg, a picture rendered more remote by a haze of tobacco smoke.

Von Arenburg was telling a story. He told it with his heels upon the table. Now and then the breeze would leave his prose with a dozen bars of hand music, even as long ago the harps broke in and lent their assistance to the chante-fable.

"I believe in love," said the picturesque Von Arenburg, "no more than I believe in metaphysics. My reason is that once I did believe in both. That is a powerful reason, for in those days of my belief I was a fool."

"When I was young," he was twenty-three—"I was perhaps as foolish as any one here present."

"One day of a year now long past, I saddled a horse, strapped a valise to the saddle and started on a tour through the Austrian Tyrol. It was 4 o'clock, or thereabouts, on the second day, and I had struck into a most weird and wicked looking road. It was lined with stunted fir trees, all bent in the same direction, as if warped by fire. It had not the appearance of a modern road accustomed to the wheels of the mail cart, but down it might have ridden the Erl King and been in keeping."

"Being a fool and so filled with the craving for romance, I liked it. Now, that turning," said I, "with this gibbet-like fir tree, ought to lead to something of interest."

"I did. For when I turned it I found a low wall built across the road, and on the wall rudely painted with tar the word 'Closed.' I was accompanied by a Dalmatian hound, whom we will name Sancho, because for one thing he was given in embossment, and for another he was devoted to me. Have you noticed in life the fact that fools have the faculty of attracting friends? Cervantes noticed it as I have. Hand me your tobacco pouch. Well, as I was saying, I was accompanied by the dog; and, as he could not climb the wall, I got down and put him over. He did not like it, for he whined and licked my face. I put my horse, Plutarch, at the wall and landed on the other side, and then I pricked along the road marked 'Closed.' Sancho following."

"It was a tortuous road, and the fir trees had given place to hedges of marvelous luxuriance. Past one of the turnings the hedge upon my right suddenly gave place to a wall high and moss-grown, and evidently fencing in a park."

"This surprised me, for a park in this part of the Tyrol was about the last thing one might have expected to find, except, maybe, an honest landlord. I rode along, and the echo of the wall made a sound like the clamping of a calvalcade."

"Assuredly this road is very still," I said, and Plutarch shook his head and pricked his ears, as if the adventure displeased him.

"At last I came to a huge gate, absolutely red with rust. On each of the supporting pillars stood a dragon holding a shield, and from the gate, by rusty wires, hung a tablet of wood, which, to judge from its appearance, must have been there many a year."

"Whatever had been written upon it the weather had erased, at least in part, for I read with difficulty these words:

"All persons warned—infamous—Countess."

"This was a fascinating notice, you may be sure, to a fool in search of the out; but the avenue that led from the gateway was more fascinating still, for it was lined, not only by trees on either side, but by men."

"They were not living men, but men of stone, preposterous, badly carved and green with moss. They were twenty feet high and all blowing trumpets, while on the heads of some Nature had planted gilly-flowers that seemed like furious yellow flames."

"It was horrible, for Nature, who can sometimes lend a terrible touch to things with the aid of a few weeds or a little moss, had done so here."

"I burst the gate open with a kick, for the tongue of the lock was eaten away to a few flakes of rust, and lying Plutarch to a bar, I entered the avenue, followed by Sancho."

"With the trumpets arching over me like the Caudine Forks I marched along quickly, tapping my boot with my whip to keep my courage up, tramping the weeds under foot, and attempting to reconstruct the mysterious notice upon the gate."

"A turning of the avenue brought me to the frontage of a large house and a wilderness, which I imagined

placed on the gate warning travelers not to enter. Some five years before my adventure the local authorities became alarmed and walled up the road."

"Doubtless, my friends, it was the ghost of the dead Countess I had seen at the window. If you grumble and say you have read better stories in the pages of Tieck or De la Motte Fouque, I can but agree with you. But if you will have a moment's patience I will convert my story into a parable, just as mine host of the Golden Cat converts Rhenish into Neirstein, Neirstein into Hattenheim, Hattenheim into Rudesheim, by the simple process of altering the label."

"I returned, then to Vienna, and thence I sent my father's architect into the Tyrol to examine the house, break open the oubliette and unravel the mystery. With him went two friends of mine who are alchemists—and you know what a Viennese alchemist is—believing neither in demons nor ghosts, and these gentlemen between them took down the scaffolding and came upon the oubliette and its mechanism."

"The mechanism, the architect declared, was originally intended to work on the pressure of a button in the wall, so that a lady tripping up the stairs and touching the button with the handle of her fan could precipitate the gentleman following her into the oubliette. But, being worn out; the oubliette had taken to working on its own account; and this was fortunate for the Countess Cavorna, as her spirit, willing enough, was too weak to effect the pressure of a button."

"The oubliette was choked with skeletons—all of men, dressed according to the fashions of the times during which they had fallen victims."

"Lowermost of all, and apparently the first victim was a skeleton to whose skull still adhered a few locks of white hair. From letters in his pocket he was found to be Count Cavorna, the lady's husband. Then came layers of what had once been married men, and well-to-do, to judge by the letters in their pockets, though of gold and jewelry they were stripped. Then came a layer of not-so-well-dressed young men, but strange to say they were all possessed of purses and watches of the once well-to-do men below them. Then, above these, there was a skeleton which Von Hummell declared must, from the conformation of the skull, be that of either a poet or an idiot—a poet presumably from his dress, which was very poor. The topmost layer was composed of very youthful men, while the topmost victim and last was a boy."

"As Von Hummell pointed out, the lowermost layers must have fallen victims to the attractions of the Countess in the flesh, inasmuch as their attire was of the period before her death, while the uppermost had fallen to the charms of her soul, as I but no one dared to go near the house to burn it or raze it, so a notice was

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