

THE INHERITANCE OF JEAN TROUVE

By NEVIL HENSHAW Author of "Alone in the Grand Woods, etc."

BOOK TWO.—BAYOU PORTAGE CHAPTER VIII.—CONTINUED

A flood of words rushed to his lips, hard ugly words which, if spoken, could scarce have been unsaid. But Toinette saved me from the peril of my anger. She sat now with her face buried in her hands and her voice came strangely dull and muffled from behind the barrier of her tight-pressed fingers.

"So there you are, Jean," she repeated. "If you are wise you will make a far different choice from your former one. A while ago I said that I did not tell you at first because I hoped that things would change. Now there is no hope and things will not change except, perhaps, for the worse. If through the last few days I have hidden my feelings, it has been only that you might do your best, and what is the result? Your loss is the greater, and I am no longer fair to you. You should work for those coffee-house keepers upon the mainland. You should go where your efforts will bring their just reward."

Rising, she stood for a moment before me, her whole small body trembling with the final desperate effort that was to carry her from the room. "There now, Jean," she gulped. "You know, it will always be like this with us. And you are only a boy."

By now I had lost the last vestige of my anger. Toinette had struck at its root with her first few words. As she had said, I was only a boy, but this lesson in the value of things was very complete. Though my thoughts groped blindly, I was beginning to understand.

"One question, Toinette," said I. "You love me?" "Why, yes, Jean," she answered simply. "And Papa Ton loves you too."

Then my eyes filled and I understood. "Bien," said I. "The rest does not matter. Let us get up now, and forget what you have said." But we ate nothing that night, for Toinette had reached the limit of her endurance. Far into the darkness she sobbed and shivered in my arms as she told of the torments of those last few days.

"Ah, Jean, it was so hard, so hard," she repeated over and over again. "Never have I known such shame. I could not have stood the firelight. Even the embers were too much for me. And yet, Jean, I might have known that you would not think that Papa Ton was treating you unfairly. Before, when the skins were all our own, it was not so bad. This time it was more that I could bear."

"And your choice, Jean, which you say was no choice at all, I know now that I could not have stood it if you had gone. But you must not think badly of Papa Ton the next time, and the time after that, and all the other times to come. I could not stand that either, Jean. Almost would I rather have you go. Despite his faults, Papa Ton is a good father—the best in all the world. Always he is kind and gentle, and the drink is not his fault. No one but himself knows how he fights against it. Believe me, he tries hard."

"Of course, Toinette," I soothed her. "Do not let who has watched his trying, know? It is because I love him also that there has been no choice."

Moorside was certainly a charming abode; but there is no denying the fact that it was an exceedingly isolated one. Standing on a lonely eminence, surrounded by the billowing undulations of the moors which gave it its name, and distant some three or four miles from any other habitation, it was scarcely the residence one would have expected of a solitary old man to choose.

Nevertheless my uncle—a rich and rather eccentric bachelor—had elected to spend the remainder of his days there. The large, rambling, yet remarkably comfortable and well built gray stone house, together with its fair-sized gardens, orchard and garage, had been left him by a remote connection, and though with his wealth, and neither wife nor child to fetter his movements, he might have selected a far more pretentious domain, something quaint about Moorside pleased his fastidious fancy, and, once established there, no power on earth could induce him to leave it.

People called him "peculiar," and deplored the taste that made him prefer the vast silence of nature to the chatter of their drawing-rooms. But he went his way unheeding, and I, after being invited to spend some weeks with him in his "Lancashire wilds," ceased to wonder at the fascination the place possessed.

The wide expanses of sky above; the apparently limitless spaces of green-brown moorland below, were beautiful with a strange, almost awe-inspiring beauty, which in truth held a magical spell. The warm silence when one lay on the sun-kissed grass, over which the cloud shadows floated so softly, was paradisaical, though it seemed full of sound. The drowsy humming of countless insects; the swift rattle of a scurrying rabbit—in fact, all those notes which go to make up creation's marvelous undersong—were exquisitely and inextricably blended. I was never tired of listening to such harmony, and the glorious summer days ended only too fast. The date fixed for my return home had come and gone, but at Uncle Roger's request I stayed on. Autumn gales began to sweep across the moors, and in the lengthening nights, the wind sobbed mournfully round the lonely old house. Often during those darkest of dark hours before the dawn, I piled more logs on my bed-room fire, and stirred it into a brighter blaze, so that its cheerful crackling might overpower that melancholy wailing, which sounded like the heart broken sighs of those

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AN ALARMING EXPERIENCE

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One morning, on returning to luncheon, I was surprised to find my uncle already in the dining-room. Never, since my arrival at Moorside, had I known him appear at any meal till several minutes after the gong had sounded. Indeed it was his habit to linger in the library up to the very last moment, and no one dared invade his privacy save Davenport, the butler, an old and trusted servant, who also acted as his master's personal attendant.

I am going tonight to Manchester, my dear Hilda," Uncle Roger remarked, as we seated ourselves at the table. "I find there is rather an interesting collection of books to be sold this afternoon. So I shall take Davenport with me, and probably remain until tomorrow evening. You will not be dull, I flatter myself that your tastes are too like my own for you to require trivial amusement from external sources, and I trust you will not feel nervous there is really not the slightest occasion."

"No," I answered somewhat dubiously. "I was far from timid, as a general rule, but on the other hand, my courage had never been put to any very severe test. The prospect, however, of spending the night alone with three women servants in a house so isolated as Moorside, would not have dismayed me except for the fact that my uncle's two hobbies were both expensive ones.

His passion for gathering together rare old editions had already rendered his library one of the most valuable private collections in England, while his wonderful assortment of unset gems was even more costly and considerably more notorious.

These precious stones, each and every one of which was remarkable for its singular beauty and worth, had been brought by him at different times from all parts of the world, and, much as I admired them, their presence in such a desolate, unprotected spot, was in my humble opinion anything but an unmixed pleasure.

"The jewels Uncle Roger," I began diffidently at last. "Oh," he answered smilingly, "is that what is troubling you? Well, I am going to take them with me. My dear old friend Professor Grassmere has often expressed a great desire to see them, and as he is a confirmed invalid, he cannot possibly come here. The jewels, therefore, must go to him, and that is the reason I shall require Davenport. When I say the jewels, however, I mean all except the big diamond. That I really dare not risk, and shall leave it locked up in the top right-hand drawer of my writing table. But you need have no fear concerning it, for Moorside has never yet been visited by thieves and the chances are about a thousand to one against it being so visited on the particular evening."

I tried to assume a calmness I was far from feeling. Presently he motored away with Davenport, the latter keeping guard over a most unpretentious looking bag, wherein reposed the famous gems. The day which had been so fair and still, gave place toward evening to a dark wild night. Strong gusts of wind drove the rain in cold showers against the windows, whilst the moors echoed the solemn chanting of the mysterious voices of the storm.

Inside the house the old woodwork creaked weirdly and the insistent tapping of bare creper branches sounded so lonely, that I brook myself to the fireside with a book. I had become absorbed in the interest of what I was reading when the door opened, and on looking up, I started to see a man standing on the threshold.

He held up his hand with a warning gesture, and as he advanced into the room, I recognized him at once. I had often seen him loitering about in the orchard, in the hope, so Mrs. Cookson, the housekeeper, informed me, of a word with the parlor maid, to whom he was, or desired to be, engaged. I had never liked the expression of the fellow; his keen, cunning face and shifty eyes seemed ever on the watch, and his sudden appearance in the drawing room at nearly ten o'clock gave me anything but an agreeable surprise. I rose to my feet with an exclamation of extreme annoyance.

at the steadiness of my own top— "you have come on a fruitless errand, for my uncle took them away with him this afternoon."

For an instant an ugly look crossed the man's face—the look of a beast balked of its prey. "No, Lie, young lady," he exclaimed, turning on me fiercely. "Lies won't serve your purpose I warn you."

"How dare you accuse me of falsehood?" I was beginning indignantly, when a sudden sense of self-preservation silenced the words on my lips. "No," I went on quietly, "you are right. Lies will not serve my purpose. But I can only repeat my former statement: The jewels are not in the house, disbelieve me or not, as you please."

"A likely story," he blustered. "But I'm too old a bird to be caught with such salt, and I mean to search the place from end to side."

"Very well," I answered, secretly wondering how I was to possess myself of the diamond. A sudden idea flashed into my mind, or perchance an inspiration, from St. Anthony, to desperately, ever had the greatest devotion. "Have you secured all the outer doors? No motor, much less any footsteps, could be heard in this storm, and it would be awkward, to say the least, if my uncle and Davenport returned before you were ready."

He gave me a sharp glance, and then to my amazement, proceeded to act upon my advice. "VELVETEX RUGS Suitable for any room or hall. They last a life time. We pay Freight or Express both ways on all orders in Ontario. 'Velveter' is not the kind with the dirt woven in, and soon to shake to pieces."

Every possible and impossible hiding place suggested itself to me, only to be impatiently dismissed. I heard heavy footsteps returning; an instant more, and my chance would be gone. Stooping over the fire, I placed the gem amongst the wood ashes that lay piled in little soft gray heaps upon the tiles, and when the man entered, he found me leaning back in my chair, with my open book upon my knee. "My word, but you're a cool hand," he remarked in a tone of reluctant admiration.

"I am cool because I have nothing to fear," I replied. "You told me that you came for the jewels and as they are not here, why should I disturb you? You have nothing to gain by injuring me."

He made a gesture of impatience and moved away. "Are you not coming?" he asked when he reached the door. "Why should I?" I replied. "What you intend to take, you will take, and as I am powerless to prevent you, I prefer to remain where I am."

A few moments later, I heard drawers broken open, locks wrenched off, doors banged in, books and ornaments thrown to the ground, while a stream of oaths greeted each fresh but fruitless attempt to discover the coveted gems. Presently the sound of a heavy iron door grating slowly on its hinges, warned me that at last my unwelcome visitor was entering the strong room, where all the plate was stored, of which Mrs. Cookson always kept the key.

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