

Thursday, October 23, 1919

"THE NET"
By Rex Beach

(Continued from page ten.)

as an ambulance appeared he passed into the room where Johnson lay. As he emerged a moment later O'Connell drew him aside.

"Maruffi won't try to leave town till it's good and dark," he said. He's got a girl, and I've an idea he'll ask her to hide him out."

"It was his girl who turned him up—she and Blake—"

O'Connell cried sharply "Wait! Does he know she did that? If he does he'll make for her, sure."

"That may be. Those two women are all alone, and I'd feel better if they were safely out of the way."

"I'll have to see to that," he said.

An instant later they were clattering over the uneven flags while their vehicle rocked and bounded in a way that threatened to hurl them out. Even before they reached their destination they saw people running through the dusk toward the house in which the two girls lived and heard a shot muffled behind walls. O'Neil reined the horse to his haunches as the shrill cry of a woman rang out above them, and the next moment he and O'Connell were inside, rushing up the stairs with headlong haste. They were brought to a stop before a bolted door from

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behind which came the sounds of a furious struggle.

"Blake! Norvin! Blake!" shouted O'Connell.

"Break it down!" O'Neil ordered. He set his back against the opposite wall, then launched himself like a catapult. The patrolman followed suit, but although the panels strained and split the heavy door held.

"By God! he's in there!" the Chief cried, as he set his shoulder to the barrier for the second time. "Once more! Together!" Through a crevice which had opened in the upper panels they caught a glimpse of the dimly lighted room. What they saw made them struggle like madmen.

Another shot sounded, and O'Neil in desperation inserted his fingers in

the opening and tore at it. Through the aperture O'Connell saw Maruffi run to an open window at the rear, then pause long enough to snatch the taper from its sconce at the foot of the little shrine and, stooping, touch the flame to the long lace curtains. They promptly flashed into a blaze. Parting them he bestrode the sill, lowered himself outside and disappeared. It was an old and effective ruse to delay pursuit.

"Quick! He's set fire to the place," O'Connell gasped and dashed down the hall.

A tremendous final heave of O'Neil's body cleared his way, a few strides and he was at the window, ripping the blazing hangings down and flinging them into the court below. When he turned it was to behold Vittoria Fabrizio kneeling beside Blake. Her arms were about him, her yellow hair entwined his figure.

"A light! Somebody get a light!" the Chief roared to those who had followed him up the stairs, then seeing a lamp nearby he lit it hurriedly, revealing the full disorder of the room. He knelt beside Vittoria, who drew the fallen man closer to her, moaning something in Italian which O'Neil could not understand. But her look told him enough, and, rising, he ordered some one to run for a doctor. Strangers, white-faced and horrified, were crowding in; the sound

of other feet came from the stairs outside, questions and explanations were noisily exchanged. O'Neil swore roundly at the crowd and drove it ahead of him down into the street, where he set a man to guard the door. Then he returned and helped the girl examine her lover's wounds. Her fingers were steady and sure, but in her face was such an abandonment of grief as he had never seen, and her voice was a little more than a rasping whisper. They were still working when the doctor came, followed a moment later by a dishevelled figure of tragedy which O'Neil recognized as Oliveta.

At sight of her foster sister the peasant girl broke into a passion of weeping, but Vittoria checked her with an imperious word, meanwhile keeping her tortured eyes upon the physician. She waited upon him, forestalling his every thought and need with a mechanical dexterity that bore witness to her training, but all the while her eyes held a pitiful entreaty. Not until she heard O'Neil call for an ambulance did she rouse herself to connected speech. Then she exclaimed with hysterical insistence:

"You shall not take him away! I am a nurse; he shall stay here. Who better than I could attend to him?"

"He can stay here if you have a place for him," said the doctor.

O'Neil drew him inside, inquiring, "Will he live?"

The doctor indicated Vittoria with a movement of his head. "I'm sure of it. The girl won't let him die."

The news of the combat travelled fast and far and it came to Myra Nell Warren among the first. Despite the dreadful false position in which Bernie had placed her with respect to Norvin, the girl had but one thought and that was to go to her friend. She could not endure the sight of blood, and her somewhat childlike imagination conjured up a gory spectacle. She was afraid that if she tried to act as nurse she would faint or run away when most needed. But she was determined to go to him and to assist in any way she could. It was not consistent with her ideas of loyalty to shrink from the sight of suffering even though she could do nothing to relieve it.

When she mounted the stairs to Oliveta's living-quarters she was pale and agitated, and she faltered on the threshold at the sight of strangers. Within were a newspaper reporter, a doctor, the Chief of Police, the Mayor of the City, while outside a curious throng was gathered. Seeing Miss Fabrizio, she ran toward her sobbing nervously.

"Where is he, Vittoria? Tell me that he's safe!"

Some one answered, "He's safe and resting quietly."

"Take me to him."

A spasm stirred Vittoria's tired features; she petted the girl with a comforting hand, while Mayor Wright said, gently:

"It must have been a great shock to you Myra Nell, as it was to all of us, but you may thank God that he has been spared to you."

The reporter made a note upon his pad, and began framing the heart interest of his story. Here was a new and interesting aspect of an event worth many columns.

Vittoria led the girl toward her room, but outside the door Myra Nell paused, shaking in every limb.

"You—you love him?" asked the other woman.

The look that Myra Nell gave her stabbed like a knife, and when the girl and sunk to her knees beside the bed, with Blake's name upon her lips, Vittoria stood for a long moment gazing down upon her dazedly.

Later, when she had sent Myra Nell home and silence lay over the city, Norvin's nurse stole into the great front room where she had experienced so much of gladness and horror that night, and made her way wearily to the little image of the Virgin. She noted with a start that the candle was gone, so she lit a new one and, kneeling for many minutes, prayed earnestly for strength to do the right and to quench the leaping, dazzling flame which had been kindled in her heart.

(To be continued next week.)

BETTER QUALIFIED

"Rastus, how is it you have given up going to church?" asked Pastor Brown.

"Well, suh," replied Rastus, "it's dis way. I likes to take an active part, an' I used to pass de collection basket, but dey's given de job to Brothah Green, who jest returned from Ohah Thai-ah."

"In recognition of his heroic service, I suppose?"

"No, sah, I reckon he got dat job in recognition o' 'his havin' lost one o' his hands," while your friends can hear them.

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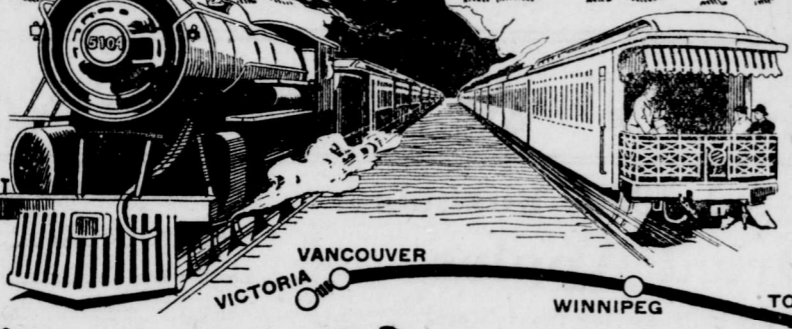
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