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POWER LOT

(Continued from page 1143.)

"What do you think? In such a case as this, Robert Hilton, I believe I would think for myself, and right strongly."

"I could buy her off, if I had the money—that is rightfully mine."

"I do not understand you."

"I said that I could buy Cuby off."

"I wish," said Mary—for she thought that Rob was more deeply implicated than he actually was, and so she had no mercy—"I wish that Virginia would come in with her ox-whip." Tears of rage and disgust filled her eyes.

"Miss Stingaree, I have never wronged Cuby." Rob faced her with stern dignity and royal faith at last.

"They got me drunk. I swear to you, I remember nothing of the marriage ceremony. I slept, drunk, all night on the floor."

"You had promised to marry her."

"I—I thought she took it in fun."

I meant it in fun—that is, of course, not seriously. How could I marry, on nothing, off here?"

"Evidently she took it seriously; and—you promised her, and—you have married her. A promise and its fulfillment. I see no way but to make the best of it."

Rob looked away out of the window; his haggard face and quivering, parched lips were pitiful to see.

"Sit down," said Mary, as she returned to her seat by the table, resting her head on her arm; her own face was sorrowful.

Rob sat down, weakly, as though no health or strength remained in him.

"Well, I'm done for," he said. "It's all over, and I'm done for; and I've lost your respect now, forever."

"No, oh no," she answered quietly; "you have never yet—won it—very fully." She, whose tone was usually electric with meaning and decision, spoke now so compassionately, so fearful of wounding him, he cried from the very depths.

"You could never respect me, now."

"That means," she sighed, "you haven't the courage to get up after a fall, to win out, to climb up, to gain your own self-respect first of all. I wondered if you would have the courage. I knew—you had—considerable courage; I wondered if you would have—such courage."

Rob sat a while, silent, his head in his hands, and his ruminations seeming to bring him no exaltation.

"The road looks devilish steep," he said at last, grinding his teeth, and looking up with only remorse and bitterness on his face.

Mary did not answer.

"I can't live with her," he continued angrily. "I don't love her, really—and she doesn't honestly and truly care for me. She—I have always seen it—she bridges and blushes with all her soul when Captain Jim Turbine comes in sight. But she thinks, she and her father, that I may have money some time. Cuby thinks I may be able to take her to gay cities and all that sort of thing, some time. Anyway, I can't go down there, down to the River, to live—I can't do it."

"Do they ask it?"

"N-no; Gar' said better live up here till I'd earned enough to buy a home. It's a great inspiration, isn't it, to work for—to work as I've got to work?"

He lifted his dry, haggard eyes, stolid with despair, to Mary.

It seemed to him that her manner toward him had never been so considerate, so almost confidential, as now—now that he had lost her. Her voice ran on at last, so kindly:

"The steepest hills are sometimes climbed, not through 'inspiration,' but only with pain, persistence and pain. It doesn't make any difference, does it, so long as we get to the top? There might be a view up there that would almost make one forget the pain. I do not know—

but it might be. I believe I would trust to it. I believe with all my soul it would prove true."

In such a tone, a mother, free of all passion save the heavenly, might speak to a crushed and bleeding child. It was tragic, to Rob; but, still it was sweet; any tenderness from her was unutterably sweet. And if, like a child, he might have put his head down on her breast, just that once, just for one moment, and felt her hand on his forehead, he believed that he could go forward, marry Cuby, raise his family, hoe potatoes, to the last earthly sunset, and then knock with square shoulders at the gates of heaven as a faithful husbandman and householder.

That memory was not to be his. Her dark eyes pitied his weakness, but her tried heart turned from him with a weary sigh.

He went to his own room, sank on the bed, and slept with the heavy reaction of one, who, from a vista of majestic battles and bays of victory, suddenly turns to find that he has nothing to live for.

He did not hear the call to dinner.

"At it ag'in, up in his room, I s'pose," said Bate to Mary; "brought a bottle home with him, prob'ly."

Mary did not know, but her heart gave a bound of relief in spite of herself, when Rob came down in the early evening scrupulously dressed for "Sunday," penitent and resigned, his eyes slightly dazed at the new, hard future which faced him with the stupendous mushroom growth of a single night.

"Goin' down to take yer wife to meetin'?" Bate inquired, in a tone of unusual jocularity.

"Yes," said Rob, and it would have been hard to pick a fight with him.

In his heart of hearts he was going down to the Baptist meeting-house to hear Mary sing. It was the monthly evening "song service," and Mary affiliated herself with the River so far as to go down to sing with and for them on these occasions, just as in old times. "Special request" for solos poured in upon her at these times, and she complied, meekly, religiously. It was about the only time one ever saw her meek. When she shone, and her voice thrilled you and sent light into the souls of the spiritually dim of vision, then it was that she was meek; and it was worth going to see and hear.

Rob went in to the meeting in the face of the gaping villagers, with Cuby showily hanging onto his arm. Verily, Rob's heart was safe broken.

"Say, what was yer maiden name afore ye got married, Daisy?" he heard an envious youth taunt him from among the group which besieged the door.

Rob's polished, clean-shaven face did not change, any more than if he had not heard the insult; it did not touch him. Nothing mattered much. It mattered to Cuby. She sprang deftly aside and dealt that wicked one a ringing box on the ear with the palm of her pretty hand.

"Mind your own business," she admonished him, with finality. Cuby was immensely admired and respected among the River boys, and he of the aggressive speech melted on the instant into abashed retreat.

Mary sat with the "choir" on the rude platform, and sang with them, entirely patient of the nasal or strident voices which accompanied hers. Rob thought her voice, as compared with others, like a white-winged boat sailing a clear, straight path through a choppy sea. He waited until the drastic office of the general hubbub should cease, and he should hear her voice alone.

"Miss Stingaree is 'specially requested,' to know if she will sing 'Peace, be still,'" announced officially the salubrious tones of Captain Belcher.

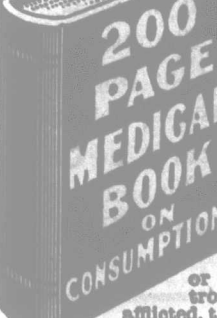
Miss Stingaree sang, and the Galilean storm, perturbing in some way or other every poor human soul there present, fell abashed and wondering at her voice:

(Continued on next page.)

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