

THE UNQUENCHABLE FIRE:

Or, The Tragedy of the Wild.

CHAPTER X.

The woman drew off. The last trace of levity had vanished from her eyes. Their blue depths gazed out upon the strange scene with horror and dread. In that moment she understood the power she had wielded with these two men, and a thrill of regret shook her frame. She saw in the eyes of both the cruel purpose which was in their minds. It was death for one of them. And even in that moment of suspense, she found herself speculating. Which of them would go down?

There was no sentiment in her thoughts. These two were nothing to her. She would regret the death of either as she would regret the death of any strong, healthy man; but that was all. Her horror was a natural revulsion at the prospect of witnessing death dealt out in the ruthless manner that these men contemplated.

Just for one instant the desire to stay the combatants rose uppermost in her mind. She stepped forward again and raised a protesting hand. "Are you brothers or wolves of the forest that you'd kill each other? If you fight for Aim-sa she'll have neither of you."

Her words rang out clear and incisive. In her excitement she had forgotten the halting phrases of the White Squaw, and spoke fluently enough. Nick was ominously silent. Ralph answered her. "Stand back, an' remember ye're the squaw of him as wins ye in fair fight."

Then he cried out to his brother: "Are ye ready?"

Nick made no audible reply. His face looked the words his lips did not frame. He was ready, and the passion in him was more than willing. Once, before he closed with his opponent, he glanced round at Aim-sa. It may have been that he sought one look of encouragement, one smile; it may have been. But the beautiful face he looked upon had no smile for either. It was dead white under its tanning, and the blue eyes were widely staring. Ralph did not take his eyes from his brother's face, and the fierce light in them was as the gleam of the eyes of the timber-wolf prowling at night around a camp fire in the forest.

For a moment a heavy cloud spread itself over the face of the sun, and the grey daylight of winter again covered the mountain billows. Instantly the forest had lost its look of spring, and the air had returned to the chill of the darker months. The bald break in the forest looked more cheerless than a waste ground in a city, and those who stood about to fight for life became savage images that looked something less than human.

Nick, larger than his brother, was a tower of teeth and muscle. As he stood there, clad in a cotton shirt and trousers belted at the waist, he was the figure of a perfect man. His shaggy head was thrown back, and but for his expression he would have been handsome. Ralph was the smaller by inches, but his muscles were as fine-tempered steel. And there was even more of the Wild in his expression than in that of his brother. The ferocity in his face was wolfish, and he was not good to look upon.

Both had bared their hunting blades—long knives at once vicious and coldly significant. They were knives that knew only life and death, knives which had ever been handled by those who understood such craft.

the warning of every contemplated attack. But Ralph's swift movements harassed Nick; they pressed him sorely, and often drove him to extremity in his defence. He was driven to twist and turn, which his heavier build rendered clumsy, to avoid the savage thrusts. But for long he kept distance, and he knew that while the other was wasting strength his own was being carefully husbanded.

Ten minutes passed; still they had not come together. Ralph charged in with upraised knife; the blow was warded, and he passed on, only to swing round on the instant and repeat the attack from the opposite direction. But always Nick faced him—grim, determined, and with deadly purpose. Once the latter slipped; the footing was none too secure. Instantly Ralph hurled himself upon him, and his blade scored his brother's arm and left a trail of blood from elbow to wrist. That one touch let loose Nick's pent-up fury, and he allowed himself to be drawn.

The two came together with a terrific impact. Nick slipped again. This time he could not save himself. His feet shot from under him, and he went down backwards. In his fall he seized Ralph's knife-arm at the wrist, and with his own slashed a fearful blow at his face. He failed. Ralph's agility was as furious as it was full of force. In turn he caught Nick by the wrist, and, with a great wrench, sought to dislocate his shoulder.

But his brother was a tower of strength. As well try to tear a limb from the parent oak. Ralph's effort died out, and they lay upon the ground fighting to free their weapons. It was a dreadful battle—so silent, so fierce. But the horror of it lay not in the deadly intent, the flashing steel, the grim silence. These men were brothers; brothers whose affection had stood them through years of solitary labors, trials, and privations, and which had changed to the wildest hatred the moment a woman had come into their lives. And as they lay upon the ground they strove for each other's life as they would struggle for the life of any forest beast.

And as the moments swept by in quick succession they rolled, they writhed. Now Ralph was uppermost; now Nick sought to drive the downward blow. Now Ralph made to twist his knife-arm free from the iron grip that held it; now Nick slashed vainly at the air seeking to sever the sinewy limb that held threat above his face.

It required only the smallest slip, the briefest relaxation of the tense-drawn muscles on the part of either, and death awaited the unfortunate. For long neither yielded one iota, but the struggle was too fierce to last. Human strength has but narrow limits of endurance when put forth to its uttermost. Given no slip, no accident, there could be only one conclusion to the battle. Victory must inevitably be with the man of superior muscle. Neither fought with a fine skill; for used as they both were to the knife, their antagonists of the forest only possessed Nature's weapons, which left the hunter with the balance of power.

Already the breathing of the combatants had become painfully heavy; but while Ralph struggled with all the fierceness of his passion and put forth his whole strength, Nick reserved a latent force for the moment when opportunity arrived. And that moment was nearing.

Ralph was under, and Nick's great weight held him down, for the sinuous struggles of the other had lost their vim. Suddenly with a mighty effort, the younger man wrenched his knife-arm free, and a cry, hoarse, fierce, sounded deep in his throat. But his effort had cost him his hold upon his brother. There was a wicked gleam of steel as both men struck.

Ralph, striking upwards, was at a disadvantage. His blade, aimed at the neck and shoulder, struck Nick's cheek, laid the flesh open to the lower jaw, glanced, and buried itself in the muscle of the shoulder. Nick's blade smote with a fearful gash into the side of his brother's throat.

It was over. Ralph lay quivering and silent upon the ground. Nick rose staggering and dazed. He moved away like a man in a dream. His arms hung limply at his sides, and his eyes looked out across the wide woodland valley with a stare that comprehended nothing. His face was almost unrecognizable under the flow of blood

from his wound. Once, as he stood, one hand went up mechanically to his face, then it dropped again without having accomplished its purpose. And all the while his vacant eyes stared out upon—nothing! Presently he sat down. His actions were almost like collapse, and he remained where he sat, still, silent, almost like an image. The moments passed. The quiet was intense. A faint murmur of flowing waters came up from the river beyond.

Suddenly he moved. Then in a moment he seemed to return to passionate life. The stony stare had gone from his eyes. Intelligence looked out; intelligence such as one might find in one whose mind is on the verge of losing its balance; fearful, anxious, hunted, all mingling with a deep abiding horror.

He turned to where his brother was lying, and stood shaking in every limb; he had realized the work of his hands. He dashed the blood from his face. The vivid stain dyed his fingers, and the touch of the warm tide only seemed to add to his terror. He went up to the still form and looked down. Then he backed away, slowly, step by step, but still unable to withdraw his fascinated gaze.

Suddenly a cry broke from his lips. It was bitter, heartrending. Then a quick word followed. "Wher's—?"

His question remained uncompleted. His head turned swiftly, and he looked stupidly about him. The clearing was empty of all save himself and that other lying upon the ground at his feet, and, beyond, the carcass of the dead moose of the forest. A dreadful fear leapt to his brain; he moved tottering. His action gained swiftness suddenly. He ran to the forest edge, and, with hungry eyes, gazed in beyond the sparse fringe of scrub. There was nothing there. He moved away to the right and ran in amongst the low-growing bushes, only to reappear with more feverish haste, and eyes whose fiery glance seemed to shoot in every direction at once. On he went, round the edge of the entire clearing; in and out, like some madman running purposelessly in search of the phantom of his brain. There was no one there but himself, and the two still forms upon the ground. The one for whom he vainly searched was gone.

But he did not pause. His brain was in a tumult, there was no reasoning in it. He searched everywhere. Bush that could conceal nothing bigger than a beetle was examined; to his distorted fancy the lightning-stricken tree presented a hiding-place. Further he penetrated the woods, but always he returned to his brother's side, distraught, weary from loss of blood and a prey to a hopelessness which chilled his heart with despair, and plunged his brain into a fever of madness.

There was a long pause, and the quiet set his pulses beating and his ears drumming. Presently he turned away, and one hand was pressed against his forehead. But as by a magnet drawn, he turned quickly again, and his eyes once more rested upon the painful sight. Then all in a moment a stifled cry broke from his lips, and throwing himself upon his knees, he thrust his arms about the dead.

Suffering as he was, he raised the body and nursed the almost severed head. He muttered hoarsely, and his face was bent low till his own dripping wound shed its sluggish tide to mingle with the life-blood of the man he had slain.

Now, in his paroxysm of awful remorse, the woman was forgotten, and he only realized the dread horror he had committed. He had slain his brother! He was a murderer! For what?

At the thought he almost threw the body from him as he sprang to his feet. "No, no! I didn't murder," he cried, in a choking voice. "It was fair fight."

Then, still looking down, he drew his foot back as though to kick the stiffening clay. But the blow did not come, and, instead, he wrung his hands at his sides like a child in distress. Harsh sobs broke tearless from his lips; his breast heaved with inexpressible agony. Then he flung himself face downwards upon the sodden earth, and his fingers dug into the carpet of dead matter, clawing aimlessly but with a dreadful significance.

(To be continued.)

LONDON'S BRILLIANT SEASON

THE CORONATION AND SOCIAL ENTERTAINMENTS

Festivities to Mark the Year—Series of Functions Has Already Been Arranged.

London will soon be in the midst of the season of 1911, a Coronation season which promises to be the most brilliant ever known. So many people in so many different directions, have determined that it shall be brilliant, that its success is already assured, says the London Express.

The Coronation season will set the fashion, as regards social entertainments, for many years to come.

It is felt in high quarters that the time has arrived to throw overboard the early Victorian idea that to be respectable one must be dull, and thus effectively silence the mouths of those who have been busy predicting that social life in the new reign would be stagnant.

Hostesses who have not entertained on a large scale for many years will throw open their doors, and endeavor by the brilliance of their reputations to eclipse all previous efforts.

A new host will be the Duchess of Devonshire, Mistress of the Robes, who will lead the way with a series of magnificent functions including a royal ball at Devonshire House.

A ROYAL BALL.

The Duchess of Sutherland will give a royal ball at Stafford House in honor of the debut of her daughter, Lady Rosemary Leveson-Gower, and, in addition to several formal entertainments, will also resume her more intimate Friday evening parties, at which many prominent intellectual and artistic celebrities are always to be met.

Three American Duchesses—the Duchess of Marlborough at Sunderland House, the Duchess of Roxburgh—a new hostess at Chesterfield, and the Duchess of Manchester, in Grosvenor-square—will entertain on a large scale. The Duchess of Manchester makes her first appearance as a hostess. Another American princess, the Countess of Granard, wife, as the wife of the Master of the Horse, give a series of official and private entertainments at Forbes House.

SOME NOBLE HOSTESSES.

The Duchess of Portland will give a royal ball in Grosvenor square. The Duchess of Wellington will give another at Ainsley House. The Duchess of Norfolk will entertain largely at Norfolk House; and at Grosvenor House, which has been closed for two years, the Duchess of Westminster will give one ball, or possibly two.

The Marchioness of Lansdowne, whose coronation reception in 1902, just before King Edward's illness, was the most splendid of the whole season, attended by the Indian Princes in their gorgeous robes and by nearly every royal personage in London, will receive at Lansdowne House.

The Countess of Londesborough will give some striking and unusual entertainments at St. Dunstan's Lodge, where there is a fine ball-room, and where the charming grounds lend themselves particularly well to fanciful illumination.

CHELSEA HOUSE TO OPEN.

Chelsea House will be thrown open—the first time for many years—and Earl Cadogan will entertain largely in honor of the new Countess Cadogan and of his granddaughter, the Hon. Sybil Cadogan, who is just eighteen.

It is also possible that the Earl of Rosebery will give a ball; he has not done anything of the kind for some years, when he wound up the summer season with a large ball, at which the present King and Queen were the guests of honor.

There will of course be splendid functions at the Embassies, in which Mr. Whitelaw Reid and Count Wolf-Metternich will take a prominent part.

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CAPTAIN'S RESPONSIBILITIES

When Skippers Lose Their Ship They Lose Their Livelihood.

Some years ago, through no fault of her captain, a fine ship was piled up on the rocky coast of South America. It was an almost new passenger and cargo vessel with many people on board, yet, thanks to the skill of the skipper, all were safely landed and not a single life was lost. All attempts to save the ship were in vain and she became a total loss.

Of course, the usual British Board of Trade inquiry was held, and although the captain was complimented on his resource and bravery, and was practically absolved from all blame, his certificate was suspended for a short time and he became a broken man. He was looked upon as perhaps the finest officer in his fleet, but the inexorable rule was that all captains who lost their vessel could not be employed again.

With this black mark against him, he found it almost impossible to get another good berth in England, and he went out to South America, where he eventually obtained a post as harbor-master. Such is the unhappy lot of many a capable officer.

The passenger may often chafe and call the skipper an old woman for preferring to remain in harbor a few hours longer because a storm is raging outside, but no one can blame him for refusing to take the least risk that may deprive him of his livelihood.

When any disaster happens the captain is always to blame, although his owners may have ordered him to press on regardless of fog and bad weather. In these days of competition a delay of only a few hours may mean the forfeit of a penalty, so the captain and the owners must take risks. And when the risk ends in disaster it is the captain who pays the penalty.

A good officer with powerful friends may be able to find a snug billet ashore as harbor-master or in some other marine post, but such good fortune only comes to the few. The many must be content with the command of a small coasting vessel, or be ready to take out an ancient ship whose owners would not mind losing it on a dangerous voyage.

Is it any wonder then that many a skipper prefers to go down with his vessel to facing a searching inquiry which may try to fasten all kinds of misconduct upon him. All who have been much at sea can tell tales of captains who have deliberately refused to be rescued in consequence of disaster brought about by some error or default on their part. It may be remembered that the captain of a German liner that ran ashore a few years ago deliberately shot himself.

There was another famous case when the stranding of a liner led to the loss of many lives, among which was that of the captain. The people of the coast will tell you to this day that he was really among the saved, but preferred to disappear. Although this belief is only one of those curious ideas that possess people occasionally, cases of the kind have no doubt occurred from time to time.—Pearson's Weekly.

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