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WOLF MOON

A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT SOUTHWEST

BY JOSEPH J. QUINN

CHAPTER VII.—CONTINUED

One evening when he had left the park and his walk carried him farther than usual he came upon a little chapel secluded among a grove of oaks. He heard the voices of a choir and stepping inside observed a statue of the Little Flower of Jesus. He had heard of the wonderful intercession of this little servant of God, had read her life, that of a holy Carmelite nun who died at the age of twenty-five in 1897. There was something ineffably sweet and tender about her being. Then, too, a great devotion toward her had sprung up in every corner of the world. Especially was this so in America. An inner prompting urged him to pray there that she might intercede with God and find Joey. Accordingly he visited the chapel every evening and sent up his prayers in the little shrine, at times lighted by the summer sun, and at others poured out his soul with only the glistening votive lights throwing their shadows on the windows, stained with the life and death mementoes of the Saviour. The tabernacle light like a large ruby glowed in the dim enclosure of the sanctuary. Faint, pungent odors clinging to the feathery wisps of incense suspended above the altar told him that Benediction had been held shortly before. But his prayer was ever the same. Like Evangeline pursuing her lover he was convinced that some day he would find Joey, not tomorrow, nor the next day, but before he should be called home.

On a late June evening Corcoran was sauntering along the path near the park gates with an obsession of sad memories. A large machine set its brakes and screeching came to a sudden stop under the high pillars. A voice from the machine hailed him.

"Oh, Mr. Corcoran, won't you ride with us?"

It was Janet Hathaway and a friend of hers, Chester Simpson. Of late Janet had displayed a particular friendship for Simpson. The latter, a young chap just out of college, fell in love with Janet upon first sight.

Mr. Corcoran had observed a cooling off of the friendship between Janet and Jack. This had disappointed him. The affection between Janet and his son lighted a spark of pride in the elder Corcoran. He encouraged its development although at no time did he design marriage. He felt that the companionship of the two would ripen into a love that would later mean a joining of the families.

"Have you heard from Jack lately, Mr. Corcoran?" began Janet with a trifling show of interest.

"Yes, I had a letter from him today. He was asking for you. He remarked that he had not heard from you for quite a time." He did not hesitate to repeat Jack's concern over her forgetfulness.

"Would you mind letting me out here, Mr. Simpson? I believe its only a short walk now to my destination."

Senior Corcoran bade goodbye as he stepped from the car. Janet waved to him as he cut across the street and walked under a high wall where the shadows from an arc light played upon the wall. He appeared worried, the furrows of his forehead narrowed and sank. A strange sensation, alternately hot and cold, fluctuated in his body.

"I wonder should I acquaint Jack of her friendship with Simpson?" He stopped thoughtfully for a moment under a line of rustling maples and then started. "It seems it is almost due my boy."

He passed on under the canopy of trees turning to himself. The night was warm, summery while the air felt spiritless. A locust trilled its weary monotone adding a note of depression to the moment.

A little further he turned down a small street where the breeze was cut off by the high houses. Wall upon wall they rose in dreary perspective, the tall roofs touching, as it were, the heavens alive with fiery points. A machine spun around a corner in the distance and came toward him, speeding. He heard a familiar laugh and glanced at the car as it flashed by. It had two occupants. The man had his arm around the girl and was steering with one hand. The car shot under an arc light and in a rapid look Corcoran halted with a shudder. It was Janet and her friend Simpson.

A tremor of surprise and shame, heartburning disappointment shot through his frame. Struggling under a paroxysm of battling moods he gazed until the car was lost amid the night noises of the street. A dark frown born of piqued pride crept down from the forehead of Senior Corcoran until it showed on his face. His heart beat a heavy roll under the turbulent warfare of his feelings. A new breeze starting into life intensified the chill that at times swept the road from his face. He looked around for a place to seat himself, the surprise had weakened him. Persons sitting on their front steps watched the man believing him queer.

"No, no," he stammered to himself. "Jack shall never know it. It is well that this happened. Forgotten Jack, her playmate, in this short time. In less than—"

The thought made him start down out upon the creature muttering by the road. His steps were maddened, he staggered but held to his feet. Phantomlike he plunged here and there along the pavement as if a part of the night's shadows.

"Forgotten Jack! Forgotten Jack! I'm glad I saw. God is good." The words streamed forth in soul-stirring impulse. He was speaking aloud, unconsciously. From a doorway a woman looked out upon the creature muttering by and pitied him. Some poor soul caught up with trouble, she thought. On and on, with no destination, now through a side street, poorly lighted and narrow, he passed, and on, stumbling on the uneven pavement but catching his drooping figure before it fell. Before long he had reached the wide streets where the stars came through streets whose centers were breast with fragrant shrubs and close-cropped lawns. He had space to breathe here and his lungs expanded as if breaking the steel bands that bound them. Farther on he looked up. There was no foliage overhead, nothing but the blue-black sky cushion with its golden pins. A faint light streamed hazily across the sky, a wadding in which were caught a host of far-off worlds. Out under the rushing wind and bending branches he could live. Life seemed to come stealing down to feed his lungs from that light that peeped from the million windows of the sky.

A half hour later the bent figure came to a gravelled walk leading to the small chapel. He wanted to rush inside and bury his face in his arms, but his lungs, burning under the evening's strain, cried to remain outside under the breathing of the night. A bird flew startled from its roosting place as this dark figure stalked down under the trees. The air was redolent with the fragrance of summer flowers and pungent shrubs.

Senior Corcoran entered the chapel and knelt before the statue of the Little Flower. It represented to him all the beauty left in the world. He prayed to her whom the statue represented. An indefinable thing seemed to rush across his soul transporting him. Through an open window came a flood of air that cooled his head and hands, feverish and heated. The little red light darting high and low before the Tabernacle told him that God was there and God is always good. He would pray more earnestly than ever. He bowed his head and a strange calm settled over him. Though it came flitting memories of his wife, Jack, Joey. Where was Joey now? God would hasten Joey's steps back to him some day he felt certain. For a lengthy spell Corcoran's face lay buried in his hands. He lifted his head slowly and looking up, gazed at the statue of the Little Flower, standing in holy calm. A peculiar light seemed to suffuse itself over it, brightening the breast, the feet. A stronger effulgence selected the face and made her features stand out in its marble lines. Was it miraculous? He turned and saw; it was the moonlight streaming

through the open window. The queenly orb had risen over the bold heave of hills in the East, flooding the landscape with a transparent silver gauze. It came pouring into the chapel making brilliant the rail, the tabernacle, the linens upon the altar. Corcoran likened it to the Holy Grail, for down those moonbeams stole a thousand fancies fashioned fairylike around Jack and Joey.

The silence and the moonlight conspired to form a background for his grief and inundated his soul as a river on rampage. Tears trickled down upon his large hands. Joey! Where was Joey? Could God by His omnipotence find the child who seemed swallowed in the crater of the past?

Once more he lifted his face and through his tears looked up to the sweet face of the statue. Like a sword dropping from a great height a pain stab rushed through his heart. His mind flashed back to Jack in Oklahoma. A vision showed him writhing in pain, crying for help, lifting his hands in appeal for aid but there was none. He was out somewhere on the plains or the desert, alone, under the stars. His voice plaintive. If he could only reach him, take hold of his hand and press it to his breast, and protect him from some strange, unseen enemy. Somewhere off in the distance were mountains that threw their high shadows down upon his form, bleeding and prostrate.

Senior Corcoran rubbed his eyes as if clearing a spotted web. They had been staring at the statue. It was only a vision. The moonlight and the silence had brought it on. Thankful, full of prayer, he buried his face once more and sobbed and through them came low words, charged with sentiment and love, asking the Little Flower to intercede for Jack before the throne of God. He felt that his son was pleading to him, imploring his aid under there under the stars in Oklahoma.

TO BE CONTINUED

FIRST INSTALLMENT

High Mass was finished at Larmon and the organist played a solemn march as the good country-folk and fishermen moved slowly out of the little church. The strong sunlight dazzled their eyes; the salt tang of the sea was in the air. Not far away the great blue waves danced and splashed merrily in the wind and sunlight. Some of the people paused to look out on the restless, heaving sea; others left somewhat hurriedly. There was great confusion. Little boys and girls were darting here and there among the backing, stamping horses, and everywhere there were sounds of pleasant laughter and of turning wagons.

Martin Elkin saw that his wife and daughter were comfortably seated in the wagon; then, as they drove off, he went to the door of the sacristy and stood waiting. Father Kerr had sent for him. The old man felt somewhat nervous on being thus summoned; so many distressing things had befallen him during the past few years that he now regarded all such calls as forbidding trouble. He hoped his son Charlie was well at the seminary. Perhaps—but he shook his head by way of dispelling his fears and closed his jaws firmly.

A quick step sounded; then the priest came out through the door. He was a young man with a bright, friendly face, a kind smile shadowing his eyes. He shook the hand of the older man warmly, then opened his breviary and took out a folded paper, smiling away the old man's fears as he slipped the book under his arm in order to read the telegram more easily.

Never had such good news come to the old Father. The telegram was from the Bishop and it read thus: "Prepare for ordination of Charles Elkins within the month." The old man bowed his head, but said nothing. The priest gazed at the telegram and passed on to the sacristy. Old Martin gazed after him, the yellow paper fluttering in his trembling hand. Then he went back into the church and knelt down before the tabernacle, in tearful gratitude. The past few years, with their burden of trials and failures, had stooped his shoulders, but they had brought his heart very near to God.

He left the church and walked, hat in hand, towards home. His head felt a little dazed, for it was a long time since he had received good news. The great February thaw of four years had spoiled tons and tons of fish which he had bought to ship, depending on the usual cold weather to keep them in good condition. This was the beginning of a series of disappointments and failures. Before this he had lived in comfort, but ever since it had been very hard to keep the lad in the seminary. However, he had managed to pay for his education, though as a result, many frugal meals were eaten in the little house by the sea. And often in the long winter evenings, when father and mother and daughter sat before the fire in the little sitting room, the lamp turned low to save the oil, they talked of still greater sacrifices they might make in order that Charlie might have the books he needed to complete his course. And, away in the convent of the Ursulines, Mary, known as Sister St. Francis, passed many a silent vigil under the sanctuary

lamp, praying to God to help her parents, so that her brother might finish his course.

In vacation time, when the lad was home, many little sacrifices were used to hide their poverty from him, in order that he might not learn how great sacrifices they were obliged to make for him. They succeeded fairly well; though he guessed things were not so prosperous as they seemed. And often when he was back again at the seminary, and when the wind blew about the great solid walls of stone, he would think of the three in the little white house which trembled under the force of the roaring winds from the stormy sea; and he would console himself by the thought that it would not be long before he would be able to help them a little at home. And when he would write to his father, telling him of his hopes, the old kind face would smile wisely, and he would say quietly to himself, "Yes, Charlie, you will be able to help us; and you will pay by installments." But the old man had his own interpretation for the last word.

At dinner Martin Elkin told his wife and the news. The mother wept quietly. Annie stood up and moved quickly till she stood behind her father's chair; then the strong young arms went around the old man's neck and the hands clasped over his chest. The head bent down and the sweet lips of the child kissed the white, wrinkled cheek of her father.

The night before the ordination old Martin walked for a long time, back and forth, along the bank above the sea.

Tomorrow his boy would be a priest, and soon he would see him standing, white-robed, at the altar of God. In the hands of his son the bread and wine would be changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. How could he ever thank God enough? He stopped in his walk and looked far down through the darkest shore to where the great steady beams of the Fir Point light poured themselves out over the dark sea, warning sailors of the rocks and shoals. Hundreds of times he had seen the light shining so; and he had passed on without any further thought as to its being there. Tonight, however, he saw how beautifully symbolic it was. For centuries ago, on the mountain-side had not the Master likened His followers to a light shining in the darkness? "Ye are the light of the world." He had said. Was not Charlie to be a successor to those followers? He supposed the lad was asleep. But away in the town, kneeling before the tabernacle in the Bishop's private chapel, Charlie was praying under the faint glimmer of the sanctuary lamp. Long after he finished his prayers he knelt there silently, thinking of something. He did not know that he was thinking of what his father called "the first installment."

The "great day" dawned and the sun came up out of the sea clear and bright. Long before the time set for the beginning of the ceremony the little church was filled with friends of the lad. There were many—old and young and middle-aged—who were proud of him; for all through the years of his college course he had not changed his pleasant ways. He had come at vacation time with the old pleasant smile and the warm grip of the hand. They felt that he belonged to them; and as they waited there for his appearance, many a beautiful prayer went up to the Queen of the clergy, asking her to protect the lad and keep him holy all the days of his life.

Up in the little tower of the church the bell sounded, and when it stopped the door leading from the sacristy opened and the procession filed into the sanctuary. Charlie, clothed in the long white alb and gold-fringed stole, looked pale and a little thin, as candidates for priesthood usually do after their years of seminary training. He carried on his arm the other vestments worn by the priest at Mass.

Annie, who was in the pew with her father and mother, after one long look of affection at her brother, counted the clergy. Besides the Bishop and Father Kerr, there were eight priests, some of whom had come a great distance. Old Father McMullan, with his kind, spectacled eyes and double chin, had come from ten miles beyond Fir Point in a fish boat. The mista began to gather in old Martin's eyes. Just twenty-five years ago the old priest had baptized Charlie.

The ceremony progressed. Annie watched the priests intently as they put on their stoles. She followed each one with her eyes as, after the Bishop and his assistants had imposed hands on the priest at Mass. She wondered if Charlie knew that it was Father McMullan who pressed so heavily on his head.

She watched her brother as he received the vestments; and noticed that the last one—the chasuble, she thought it was called—reached no lower than his elbows. She knew that when the pins would be removed from this, and it would fall to its full length, her brother would have already received all the powers of the priesthood.

When he came down from the altar where he had been kneeling at the Bishop's knee, his hands were clasped and a white cloth was wrapped around some of his fingers. She knew what it meant, the hands of her brother had just been anointed with the oils of priesthood.

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