

Power Lot--God Help Us

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE TEST

It had come time for Rob to sail over to Waldeck with me to turn his crop of potatoes into good bank-notes. He was as elated as a boy—not with the prospect of renting a house for Cuby and laying in flour and fish for the winter; no, but with the thought of the day's sail. A long day, it meant to him, a sort of epitome of freedom and adventure before he put on the yoke again and settled down to the drag.

"Jim," he said, as the Mary leaped through the Gut at high tide, like a bird shivering to try her wings over seas, "I wish we could sail her to Europe. Gad, I wish we could sail her to the ends of the earth. If I were as rich as I was once I'd have a yacht—I will, when my ship comes in again; and, by Heaven, the voyages we'll go, Jim."

There was the trouble. There was no meek, struggling look in Rob's eyes, now; there was the "keen" for mad freedom. The sea does that. The hills, with the sea to glimpse afar, give you steadiness, which is greatest of all I know; but take a boat that sails true, and a wind that forces the joy of health and daring into your very breath, and changing shores that lure you on and on, and you understand how runaways feel; you understand it well. You even feel, without God's good dart of shame, the marauding heart that has its own will, in stinging air and over wild seas, and for its own will would die vain-gloriously, reckless and glad as its brother elements.

And Rob had been prisoned away from the mighty galloping horse of the deep that had so often flung out a beckoning mane to him. This was his first sail since I had brought him to Power Lot, God Help Us—a dissipated lordling crouched ruefully in the stern of my boat; now he stood erect and fearless, as handsome a fellow as I ever set eyes upon. But the spirit of the salt, wide waste about him and the way my little vessel ripped the foam up had entered into him. This it was to be a man, to sail out thus. Not the meek bearing of a yoke.

I had foreseen the temptation this whole day's business would be to Rob. The train went from Waldeck in the afternoon, at an hour when we must inevitably be there waiting for the tide. His pockets would be full of money once more. I had talked it over with Mary.

"Take him, Jim," she said. "He must be put to the test some time." And then, very gravely, as if thinking to herself far away, she said, "He will stand." But women know neither the sea nor the heart of a man.

"He will stand," she had said. What did she care I wondered. The light in her eyes was no more than nature often sent there to startle people with its beauty, no more for him than for the rest of the universe whom the imperious heart of the woman condoned with its sublime faith and pity.

Rob was not going to stand—I felt it in my bones as I regarded him now. I loved the lad. I wanted him to bear the test.

"The sea, and the wide bearing's of it, has tempted me lots o' times, Rob," I said. "But I've hung 'round. Tell the truth, I've felt a sort of concern about Mary Stingaree. Bate might—strike her. Or she might be left there, sick and alone. Some harm might happen her; and—though she's nothing to me and never can be, except the best friend I ever had, yet she kind o' draws me—she holds me. Many's the time she's told me, sharp, meaning it for my sake, I know, to go off where I could do better; but I sort of hung 'round within hailing distance, as you might say."

"She's worthy of it," said Rob, and his flushed tanned face straightened out drawn and thin as he spoke.

"Jim, you understand. If it was for her, if she were my wife—oh, God—living and digging there in Power Lot—

anything wouldn't be hard. It would be great Jim. But I'm up against something rocky that I don't clearly understand, either; and the very thought of it sickens me, old man."

"Well, I've looked at it this way: if I could care for her and guard her a bit, if I could only win her respect; since I could not have her love, her respect is a mighty good gauge to go by when a man's tryin'—to make a man of himself."

"Yes," said Rob, and a tingling look of pain turned his face red again. "Yes, that's true, Jim. And you have been a guard and a help to her, in ways some of us know, though she doesn't begin to know it all. But as for me, Jim, I've been more of a worry to her than anything else; and if she doesn't finally marry Doctor Margate—for he is not one to give it up—and if she goes away, I—I don't know as I could face it out, what I've undertaken to do; I don't know as it would be of any use."

"Well, if you were just doing it for her to look at, and approve, and perhaps applaud ye, I don't believe she would respect ye for that. But if you've made a contract between yourself and the A'mighty to fight this fight out, like the splendid gentleman and wrestler that you are, Rob Hilton, why, of course you wouldn't give up your contract, whether Mary Stingaree was looking on or not. Besides, I don't know that it's love she feels for ye—I don't suppose it is—but it's an interest; and I tell ye right now, it would break her heart if you cut the traces or bungled your job or came home stuttering and silly with drink, now."

"I reckon she would not break her heart much over me," said Rob, with a smile poignant with the hopeless sweetness of the thought.

"Then you don't know her."

"That isn't love," said poor Rob; "that's philanthropy, pure and simple. I don't give a tuppence for it."

"Mary makes out they're one and the same thing—something steady—something to hold by; and, by God, I believe she's right. Look at Bate—he thinks sometimes he loves Cuby, but what does that kind of love amount to?"

I had forgotten for the instant Rob's relation to the matter. He turned cold and white. Then he spoke, through set teeth.

"Jim, do you consider that I'm like Bate Stingaree?"

"No lad—not for a minute."

The slumbering storm in his blue eyes turned them black; then he bit his lips and melted.

"After all," he said, "I was going to make a chum of him when I first came—and there's excuse for him; but I had a great chance in the world. Oh, Jim, what a fool I've been! What a fool, fool, fool! I wish you'd lose your rudder, I wish you'd lose your bearings, and we could get carried where we should never hear of Power Lot, not any other day of my past life again."

"We're right there now. You take the helm o' yerself an' yer life this blessed minute, an' it'll be just the same as if ye'd always steered."

"What? That isn't true."

"I'm running myself on wrong principles, then. But I ain't running on wrong principles. I know what I'm about. So long as I'm steering steady, so long as I'm steering true, and my hand fails not and my heart quails not, who's a-going to throw it up at me that I been shipwrecked once on a time, or run aground on the shoals somewhere? What do I care if they do? Who don't get wrecked in one way 'r another? That ain't the point; it's what I'm doing now concerns me; and just because I had my fling on the rocks an' swallered brine till I was pretty near done for, I know the sea better, an' better how to sail 'er now. I know better where the rocks and shoals lay for me, Rob."

"Well, that may be true."

"I'm steering steadier, I'm steerin' truer 'n what I was, and I shall come into port by an' by like a man ought to come. Best o' all, maybe, I got a ballas' o' pity along with me now f'r all manner o' shipwrecked men everywhere. I ain't lost nothin', so 's I mind my helm now—I gain by it."

"Sure, it would brace a fellow up if he could look at it that way."

"Rob, I kind o' wonder at the way you flat out sometimes, and I wish to thunder you'd get up on your hind legs and stay there, and steer yourself on, with a don't-give-a-d—n f'r anythin' 'ceptin' your straight course, like the brave cuss you be."

Rob tried to smile, but something of this bright day had turned to ashes; he was thinking still of the woman he had no hope to win, and maybe he was thinking it would make no difference, therefore, if he shirked the whole fight. I tried to buoy myself up to hope for the best. In my soul I felt that there was trouble coming. He recovered from his fit of depression, but ah, the reckless, laughing wind, the tossing sea and freedom. Never siren sang to tempted man as the elements sang to Rob that day.

He did not seem to crave the drink, even when he had an opportunity that it was not considered one bit polite, among the Waldeckers, to refuse. When we had sold his potatoes at a fancy price at Burt's market—and they were fancy potatoes too, having turned out extra smooth and pretty, as things sometimes do for children and folks who don't understand the game—Burt said, friendly:

"Come on over across and take something to swash the mildew out o' yer throats. Come on." He was putting on his coat to go out with us. I wished that I'd had a chance to tip the wink to Burt beforehand not to be offering his hospitalities. I need not have had any fears on that score.

"Thank you very much," said Rob, as monotonous and indifferent as you've sometimes heard a boy speak his piece in school. "I don't drink. I don't care for it. I'll wait for you, Jim."

"Oh, Jim ain't got into long pants, yet neither," said Burt, laughing. "The invitation was to you, young man. Wal', it's a fool thing, this drinkin'. Give my regards to the rest o' the infant class," he remarked drolly, in a low tone, as we went out.

Rob drew me out of sight with him into the lee of an old shop, and counted his money again. Two hundred dollars in bank notes.

"And not long ago I was swiping an egg to get a postage stamp," he chuckled and his white teeth shone.

He took out a twenty-dollar note, put it in his purse, and stowed away the rest in an inside pocket, with a double row of pins—which I was able to make over to him from the lapel of my coat—as a further safeguard to his treasure.

"I am going into potato raising," said Rob joyously, as we swung off. "I'm going into the business on a big scale, Jim. Your Burt, there, told me he'd take and export any quantity o' such potatoes as those I brought him. I'll have more land when I rent the Treet place, and another season, I'll have a thousand dollars!"—he patted his breast, where the money lay—"where now I've only two hundred. I shouldn't wonder if I'd rent more land, and set other people to work for me. Good Lord!" spoke this son of a speculator.

"I should think you fellows would have seen there's money in it, Jim. Here am I, a greenhorn at the business, and there's not another man in Power Lot, bluffs or River, that'll stow away two hundred dollars in his pocket this season—what are you all thinking of, I wonder." So elated was he, he had even forgotten the voracious hunger on which we had passed some sympathetic remarks only a little while before.

"Well, Rob, I was thinking of dinner; and there'll be lots of dinner to be looked out for if you stand as the head of a family this coming winter, and possible illness, and chances of poor luck, and all that. Go careful on that two hundred dollars, Rob."

The sordid future rose up before him again, and perhaps I did unwisely to harp on that string of mean necessity and hard duty. Rob's inflation as a moneyed individual, and—for the first time in his life—as porter of bank notes

earned through his own efforts, abundantly sustained him, though.

"Come on, old man," he said, putting an arm on my shoulder, "I'm starving. It's my treat this time, mind you. I owe all I got to you, anyway. We'll blow out for all the grub they can show up. Where are the frescoed dining-halls of Waldeck, eh?"

Now, I had quite a bit of money saved in the bank—not much, but more than Rob had snuggled against his breast. But he had all the air of a rich man. It was ingrained in him, and a sort of ease and grace, born to him when he was born; it did not make any difference that his hands had grown rough, and that linen collars and cuffs were a dream of the past. He looked every inch an easy gentleman, and as if he were sporting in flannel shirt and the potato business just for the lark or the thing.

We had our meal together at the only restaurant in Waldeck, a coarse place, where the draught sweeping in from the water on one side, and the infernal suction of the quarry-well on the other, was so stiff that in one instance it actually took up a corner of the tablecloth and with it knocked the vinegar cruet into the sugar bowl and swept the pepper-box clean off on to the floor.

Rob was hilarious, notwithstanding that the tea was weak. The admiring waitress hovered him as if he had been a young god.

"Shall I shet the windows, sir?" she said, looking exclusively at Rob.

"No," said Rob. "Great Tamarack, no! We live on wind—that's where we hail from—this is nothing but a cooling zephyr to us. No, sweet maiden—let her blow."

He emptied the remainder of the vinegar into the sugar bowl and stirred it briskly. "Bring us some soda, if you please, fair maiden," he observed, still briskly stirring, "and we will show you some superlative 'fizz.' Hasten—the compound waits only for the enlivening application of saleratus." The gale blew his fair hair in a tangle over his forehead, and his teeth gleamed. The girl giggled ecstatically, as though such wit had never before scintillated through that base apartment.

"I tell you," she murmured, with an air of confiding her very soul to Rob, "if you want that—'fizz,' as you call it—you can get it fine over to the hotel. This place ain't got no style in it, anyway. You can get champagne, or anything you want, over to the hotel; it's a lot better than this place, and stylisher." She tossed her head, as one with cosmopolitan experience though circumscribed in vocation by low necessity.

Rob put on a sober look. "You ought not to tell that to young fellows from the country," said he whimsically. "However, I am not going to the hotel. I'm a married man, I believe, and I am going down here to the furniture store to get some housekeeping things for my Tootsy-Wootsy. Isn't that so, Captain Turbine? Come, Captain, however regretfully, I suppose we must be on the move."

He haled me forth by my official title, leaving a fee for the girl on the table. She picked it up, but did not even thank him; she watched his retreat from the door so sadly.

"Come on, Jim," said the light-hearted Rob, "I'm going to blow out this twenty dollars in some parlor knick-knacks to please Cuby."

The very fact that he urged me to go with him scattered every lingering doubt in my mind as to his reliability and good faith. I had business of my own to attend to, and we had only an hour before the tide would serve for sailing back. As for the train, Rob had never once looked that way, though there was a great noise of loading freight from the wharf in the distance, and the engine stood puffing there in the yards.

I went on about my own affairs. At two o'clock I went down to the boat, as agreed. There were Rob's parlor gimcracks nicely stowed away, and I whistled about getting ready to run up sail, sure every moment I'd see his bright face appearing to me.

Rob did not come. It was time for the train to pull out from the yard. The lad might be watching among the loafers there. He was a great hand for a laugh and a joke with anybody and a bit of excitement. So I marched over,

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