

THE INHERITANCE OF JEAN TROUVE

By NEVIL HENSHAW

Author of "Alone of the Grand Woods," etc.

CHAPTER VIII.

I RUN AWAY

When a little later we reached the warehouse upon our way to the bridge, the group of fishermen still lounged in its open doorway. This time, however, one of them rose at once, and held up a hand in languid greeting. He was a tall man, of a most repellent ugliness, and as he slouched toward us, I saw that he had had the misfortune to lose one of his eyes.

Monsieur Dugas, who had paused undecidedly, viewed his approach with sullen disfavor, stroking his thin chin as he looked at me in moments of perplexity.

"Well, Zida, what is it now?" he asked in a low voice, when the fisherman had reached the side of the jumper. "If it is the old thing, I can do nothing just now. I have had a scare."

The one called Zida jerked a thumb toward the hill.

"M'sieu the General, eh?" he inquired. "I heard that he had been prowling about here. You should be all the more willing to serve me. We do as we please upon the coast."

"But I do not live upon the coast," the storekeeper reminded him. "A little time until things settle down, Zida, and I will again be at your service."

The fisherman shrugged indifferently.

"And what of my need during that little time?" he sneered. "Ah, no, Dugas. There are others beside yourself upon the prairie, others more fortunate. It makes no difference to me."

Monsieur Dugas considered the announcement a look of awe, and gradually replacing the fear in his eyes.

"If you will wait and come to my store some time, Zida," he began, but the other cut him off abruptly.

"That will not do," said he. "It is now or never. There is my boat where we can be private should you wish to discuss the matter. As I have said, it makes no difference to me."

He turned away as he finished speaking, and Monsieur Dugas, his hesitation gone, sprang to the ground. "You will stay here and watch the jumper," he ordered sharply before he set off in the wake of the shambling fisherman.

Left to myself, I watched him gloomily as he crossed the rotten wharf, and dropped down into the cockpit of a dingy lugger. A feeling of depression had fallen upon me, and my bruised mouth, beginning to swell, caused me intense pain. After all, my case seemed hopeless. Penniless, without friends, and in the clutches of such a man as Monsieur Dugas, it was probable that I would never return to Madame Therese.

Why the storekeeper wished to keep me I could not well understand, but it was evident that he meant to do so. Perhaps he would make me work in the store. I had heard of such things in the city, and had seen boys far younger than myself clerking in the shops of the poorer quarter. Yes, that must be it. He would make me his slave.

I thought of the filthy, littered room in which I had spent the night before, of its thick knees in the mud and ooze, I could only gaze ineffectually toward the tall tops of the marsh grass that waved above my head. I took the gold piece from my pocket and gazed at it in utter dejection. What good could it do me now? Who among the denizens of that dreadful wilderness would harken to its power even though it was as large as the great noonday sun that blazed overhead? Mechanically I thrust it back into my pocket and, covering my face with my hands, gave way to my grief and fear.

The outburst must have helped me, for presently I roused myself from my despair, and once again took up my journey. At least I would keep on until it was impossible for me to go. Perhaps I might come to an open spot if I persevered.

It must have been some ten minutes later that, foundering along with my eyes strained above me in a vain search for some lower growth, I suddenly stumbled and pitched forward. Instinctively I threw my arms before my face to keep it from the touch of the murky water when, to my surprise, my hands encountered some rough but solid substance. Looking down, I saw a strange, mound-like erection of mud and twigs, its top rudely thatched with dried marsh grass. It was the home of some industrious muskrat, I neither knew nor cared. It was something firm, something substantial in that watery, elusive desolation, and I saw a glimmer of hope. A drowning man does an unexpected thing.

An instant I leaped upon it gasping, and then, very carefully, I began to climb. The light, loose-woven mass sank perceptibly beneath my weight, but my friend the muskrat had bulged well. For, by the time I reached its top, it had settled firmly down upon its foundations.

Looking back upon it now, I know of no better way of describing my

dread of Monsieur Dugas, than by the manner in which I raised my head. I did so with infinite lozeness and caution, despite my fright and weariness, drawing the tops of the marsh grass down into a screen above me, through which I hopefully peered.

One long glance I gave in the direction of the warehouse before I dropped back upon my frail tower with a sigh of satisfaction. I was saved, not only from Monsieur Dugas, but from the marsh.

Far off, a dark figure or two crashing through the grass toward the causeway, told me that the storekeeper was abandoning his unsuccessful search. Near at hand, within a few yards of me, in fact, curved the smooth waters of the bayou.

A lugger lay drawn up to the bank just around the bend, so closely hidden by the thick growth of myrtles, that from my close and lofty perch I had caught but a glimpse of her. To creep through the marsh to the bayou bank, and to follow its curve until I reached the lugger would be an easy matter. Lying as they did, around the bend, the crew of the lugger, if aboard, could scarce have seen the pursuit, and would only think that I had been lost in the marsh. True, I might have to give some account of myself, but could make that up as I went along.

Taking one more look to make sure of my direction, I slid quickly down the side of the rocking mound, and splashed my way toward the bayou bank. Here the ooze gave place to firmer ground, thickly grown with myrtles, and, crouching beneath their heavy shadow, I crept along until I reached the lugger.

To my joy I found the boat deserted. It was a trim little craft with a brick-red sail furled neatly upon the yard, and a huge, loeepiled mass of nets in the cockpit at the stern.

Dropping quickly aboard by means of one of the over-hanging myrtles, I looked about for some suitable hiding-place. Two low hatches rose above the level of the deck, but for the moment I lacked the courage to explore them. The bow, bare, and pointing toward the warehouse, offered no means of concealment. Thus there was left only the pile of nets in the cockpit, and, hurrying toward them, I burrowed my way between their stiff rasping heads until I was entirely hidden from sight. Fortunately for me, the nets were dry, and if the couch they made was rough and unpleasantly suggestive of their use, it was also soft and yielding.

Stretching myself luxuriously in the dark unfragrant cavern that I had made, I peered out through the thin slit of daylight that marked my entrance. I was soaked, and weary, and plattered with slime, but I had made my escape, and I was satisfied. Nay more, I was sanguine of the future. If I had come so successfully through the hardest part of my task, would not the rest of my return to Madame Therese prove but a simple matter?

I smiled in my new-born confidence and, lulled by the steady lapping of the current, drowsily closed my eyes. In a moment I was fast asleep.

FROM OUT THE SHADOWS

It was undoubtedly Valerie who was responsible for so unusual a departure on the part of the sunlight on that morning of late spring, for not even in the blaze of mid-summer was the sun accustomed to penetrate the gloomy recesses of the staircase in Mme. Renault's lodging-house in the Rue de Siam, a staircase where the musty fumes were wont to linger, like unto wishful wraiths brooding upon the departed dinners of another day.

Very possibly it was Valerie's hair that lured the sunshine, with its customary procedure in the matter of Mme. Renault's staircase, for the soft curls were of that brown shade that the sun loves to stray amongst until it finds the red-brown tints amid the dark coils. It may, however, have been the dimples for Valerie's smile flashed a pair of dimples into prominence that would have justified the most playful antics on the part of the sunlight in endeavouring to coax a smile.

Yet, was the smile conspicuously absent on that morning when the girl first climbed the staircase, up to the tiny room that she had rented beneath the eaves for Valerie, as they say with such pleasing euphemism in the theatrical profession, was resting; and, since this was the fourth week in which she found herself so unavoidably at leisure, she may be pardoned the absence of her customary enchanting smile.

Warily mounting the last flight, with dejection in her every step, she collided, suddenly and violently, with a young man who was rapidly descending and who clutched her as if to save himself from falling. Whereupon Valerie first said "Oh!" and secondly, since it was certainly as much her own fault as that of the young man, she continued: "Why don't you look where you are going?"

A little irritable and crudely phrased, possibly, but Valerie was very weary, and also very heart-sore, which is much worse than simply being tired. "Your pardon, Mademoiselle," said the young man contritely;

"but, indeed, I did not hear you coming." Struck by the unusual excuse, the unaccustomed phrasing of his apology, the girl glanced swiftly at his face, and then: "Oh!" she cried with a soft note of pity in her voice. "Oh, please forgive me! you are—I did not—"

"Indeed, the fault was mine," he assured her. "Yes, I am quite blind." As if he sensed the embarrassment that assailed her, he continued hurriedly: "I see you are a newcomer. Most of the residents of this charming establishment give me ample room—not only on the stairway. Are you going to live here?"

"At least, as far as I can tell at present." "Good!" he replied. "Then you must have taken the room on my landing. It is the only vacant one in the house. We shall be near neighbors, and I like the sound of your voice. Almost does that approach the ideal state. To like the voice of one's next door neighbor. Could anything be more ridiculously perfect? Give you good morning, Mademoiselle," he said, and, with that singularly beautiful smile that is sometimes given to the blind, he sadly struck, yet vastly cheerful, young man continued his descent, leaving Valerie to gaze pityingly after him from the height of the landing.

Such is a truthful account of their introduction, their first meeting. As for the growth of their friendship, it blossomed and flourished as readily as the flowers of the field. You will readily believe that the customs and usages of polite society go by the board in such free and easy institutions, as the apartment-house of Mme. Renault, the residents of which evinced a marked lack of interest in the doings either of the blind beggar of the Place Marett, or of the young girl who was no longer working.

Sometimes Valerie, starting out in the morning on her weary round in search of employment, would walk with him as far as the little church of St. Marie de la Mer, where the blind man always attended the first Mass, before making his way to his "pitch" at the corner of the Place Marett. More frequently, however, she returned with him in the evening when, weary after the long, fruitless search for employment, she gathered no little strength from his unflinching courage and optimism. In the evenings, after supper, they would sit upon the stairs talking while she watched the stars as they twinkled and laughed together beyond the tiny pane of glass that opened from their common landing.

He puzzled her exceedingly, this blind man, and somehow shamed her so that she continued to struggle against the wearing incessant blows of fate. Blind, yet always hemmed. Only the shadow for company! Yet he hustled their gloom into thin air and filled the place where they had been with laughter. He was so very brave, she thought, for sometimes he suffered—that much she realized readily enough—yet always he showed the gleam of a giant front, the same gay smile that flung the challenge of an unconquerable spirit to all the world. Also, it was obvious that he was possessed of those vague qualities that, fused into one elusive, intangible property, create that which is termed, with equal vagueness, a gentleman.

Once sitting upon the stairs in the magic twilight hour, while the stars chuckled over the love stories of the long dead centuries, Valerie ventured to question him. "Who—what are you?" she asked timidly. "I? I am a Reason, my dear," he answered, and laughed. "What do you mean by Reason?" she inquired, wondering.

For once there crept a sudden note of bitterness into her voice. "Do you not know what a Reason is?" he replied. "Indeed, the number of us is legion. They are always writing about us in the papers, those people who know nothing at all about it. They say that we may be no more war, and they give many reasons; but we are the only real Reasons. We, the great army of objects who never were, and who never shall be, men. We, who yesterday were boys and today have no place among living men. We, the Things; and it is because of us that there must be no more war."

"Ah, do not speak so bitterly," she cried. "I am not often bitter, yet I cannot but remember. Eighteen years of age, and all life lying fair and promising before me; and within three short years it had come—the day when in a single second, I was flung headlong into a road of night, a road that my unaccustomed feet must tread haltingly, fearful in the eternal blindness until, at last, I come to the end. Some of us, you know, were more fortunate. The good God took them to Himself, and they sleep very peacefully where His gentle winds rustle the poppies into whisperings above their graves; but for us who live on it is not so well. We must wait patiently until I shall please Him to take us hence."

"You are very brave," she said, and it seemed that in her voice there was the sound of tears. "Your faith is a wonderful gift that makes you so strong to endure." "It is everything," he replied, "for without it I should not trouble to endure at all."

Thus, from the deep well of his strength did she draw a little of hope, of perseverance, without which she could not have continued in the weary struggle, for the poor Valerie had no gift of faith to sustain her in the dark hours that now assailed her.

We may not know whether she ever grew to love him, and the speculation is singularly futile now. There are, it may be, some passions that are too pure, too detached from the things of earth, to be relegated to the category of human love. Yet, that he loved her was true enough, though he spoke no word of the matter. All the day long while he sat on his box at the corner of the Place Marett, with his head leaned back against the gray old wall behind him, he wove his foolish dreams around her.

There were many who, attracted by the sad loveliness of that young face, stopped to speak to him with a gentleness and a sympathy that, mayhap, they rarely showed elsewhere. Yet, amid all the tumult of human voices that daily clamoured around him there was but the one that ever made music in his ears, that turned the grey shadows into dazzling sunlight, and that sang like a lulling, fairy music, in the silent places of his heart the voice of Valerie.

In such a setting did this little drama of tragedy and love play itself out while the Spring blossomed and died, and the early Summer came, with its days of golden loveliness, while Valerie's little stock of money dwindled and she became ever hopeless and weary of so prolonged a struggle.

So weary that to that day when utterly despairing, Valerie decided on that last, fatal step that should put an end to the sordid monotony of life, for, as has already been said, she had no gift of faith to sustain her in that time of bitter trial.

One evening she came to him where he sat upon his box, and, standing beside him said: "I shall not be walking back with you this evening, Leo. I—I have something else to do."

The unseeing man strangely lifted, and the blind Eros lends sight to many. "Why? What is it that you have to do this evening?" he asked quickly.

"As a matter of fact, I am going away," she answered and wondered that her voice should be so steady. It seemed to him that all the warmth had suddenly gone out from the sunshine, and that the world had become even darker than usual.

"Where—where to?" he asked, brokenly. "I don't really know," said Valerie, "but I think that I shall go by water. It seems to be the customary way," she added, slowly.

Standing up, he groped to find her hand, and holding it, drew her near to him against the wall. "You shall not do this thing," he said. "You must not. Child, you do not understand, but it is not given to you or me to destroy that which was entrusted to us."

At the calm strength, the gentle evenness of his voice, she wondered and grew a little afraid. "Poor little one! You have nothing to hold on to," he continued. "Tomorrow, we will go to the good Father at Saint Marie. No, we will not wait until tomorrow. We will go now."

"No, not yet," she begged of him. "Wait a little while. Wait until tomorrow." "It is your wish," he said, "but you must promise me that you will not do this thing."

And at that she promised him, and, knowing that she would keep her word, he let her go.

It may, possibly, have been the tears that dimmed her vision as she turned away that were to account for the occurrence. We may not know, for Valerie never speaks of it, but it is certain that, blindly, she stepped into the roadway just as the great lorry came thundering by. This may be the simple explanation of her action, but how shall we account for that of the blind man in the matter? Was it some overpowering instinct that prompted and directed him, think you? Or did the gentle Christ of Sileh stoop swiftly and, with moistened finger, touch the shadowed eyes, and thus, in that last moment, grant vision to the unseeing? This much, at least, we know—that, before the wheels could touch her, he leaped, and, catching her in his arms flung her so that she fell frightened but in safety upon the pavement.

Came a sudden shrill clamour, a hoarse shout, the harsh scream of brakes suddenly applied, and then—silence; and Valerie found herself kneeling in the centre of a little group that stood in pitying wonder to gaze down upon the smiling, strangely beautiful face of a very gallant gentleman, who, by the grace of God, had been granted—Death.

If it is my privilege to number Valerie among my friends today, she is very lovely, and there are many who would gladly tell her so if they would but suffer them. Why it is that she does not I cannot say; but I know that Valerie has a box, a very ordinary, wooden box, that might have been used for any everyday purpose. It is such a box as a crossing sweeper or a blind beggar might, conceivably, have used for a bench. Valerie treasures it above all things, which many consider

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