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The Lust of Hate

BY GUY BOOTHBY

Author of "A Beautiful White Devil," "A Bid For Fortune," "The Marriage of Esther,"

"Dr. Nikola," Etc., Etc.

Somewhere or another I remembered to have read that, in the malady from which I believed my old friend was suffering, on or about the twenty-first day the crisis is reached, and first day the crisis should be observed. My suspicions proved correct, for on that very day Ben became conscious, and after that his condition began perceptibly to improve. For nearly a week, though still as feeble as a month-old child, he mended rapidly. Then, for some mysterious reason he suffered a relapse, lost ground as fast as he had gained it, and on the twelfth day, counting from the one mentioned above, I saw that his case was hopeless, and realized that all my endeavors had been in vain.

How well I remember that miserable afternoon! It had been scorching hot ever since sunrise, and the little room in which I watched beside the sick man's bed was like a furnace. From my window I could see the stretch of sunbaked plain rising and falling away towards the horizon in endless monotony. In the adjoining bar I could hear the voices of the landlord and three bushmen who, according to custom, had come over to drink themselves into delirium on their hard-earned savings, and were facilitating the business with all possible despatch. On the bed poor Ben tumbled and tossed, talking wildly to himself and repeating over and over again the same words I had heard him utter that afternoon at Markapulle—"five hundred paces north-west from the creek, and just in a line with the blasted gum."

What he meant by it was more than I could tell, but I was soon to discover, and that discovery was destined to bring me as near the pit of hell as I have ever come. I was sitting on a bench and took in the hopeless view. A quarter of a mile away across the plain a couple of wild turkeys were feeding, at the same time keeping a sharp lookout about them, and on the very edge of the north-eastern horizon a small cloud of dust proclaimed the coming of the mail coach, which I knew had been expected three times that morning. I watched it as it loomed larger and larger, and did not return to my patient until the clumsy, lumbering coach, drawn by five panting horses, had pulled up before the hostelry. It was the driver's custom to pass the night at the Change, and to go on again at daylight the following morning.

When I had seen the horses unharnessed and had spoken to the driver, who was an old friend, I made my way back to Ben's room. To my delight I found him conscious once more. I sat down beside the bed and told him how glad I was to see that his senses had returned to him.

"Ay, old lad," he answered feebly. "I know ye. But I sha'n't go so long. I'm done now, and I know it. This time to-morrow old Ben will know for hisself what truth there is in the yarns the sky-pilots spin us about heaven and hell."

"Don't you believe it, Ben," I answered, feeling that although I agreed with him it was my duty to endeavor to cheer him up. "You're worth a good many dead men yet. You're not going out this trip by a great deal. We shall have you packing your swag for a new rush before you can look round. I'll be helping sink a good shaft inside a month."

"Never again," he answered; "the only shaft I shall ever have anything to do with now will be six feet long, and when I'm once down in it I'll never see daylight again."

"Well, you're not going to talk any more now. Try and have a nap if you can. Sleep's what you want to bring your strength back."

"I shall have enough and to spare of that directly," he answered. "No, lad, I want to talk to you. I've got something on my mind that I must say while I've the strength to do it."

But I wouldn't hear him. "If you don't try to get to sleep," I said, "I shall clear out and leave you. I'll hear what you've got to say later on. There will be plenty of time for that by and bye."

"As you please," he replied resignedly. "It's for you to choose, and you'll listen. I could tell you what will make you the richest man on earth. If I die without telling you, you'll only have yourself to thank for it. Now do you want me to go to sleep?"

"Yes, I do," I said, thinking the poor fellow was growing delirious again. I wanted you to try more than ever. When you wake up again I'll promise to listen as long as you like."

He did not argue the point any further, but laid his head down on his pillow again, and a few moments was dozing quietly.

When he woke again the lamp on the rickety deal table near the bed had been lit some time. I had been reading a Sydney paper when I had picked up in the bar, and was quite unprepared for the choking cry with which he attracted my attention. Throwing down the paper I went across to the bed and asked him how he felt.

"Mortal bad," was his answer. "I found me long now afore I'm gone. Laddie, I must say what I've got to say quickly, and you must listen with all your ears."

"I'll listen, never fear," I replied, hoping that my reassurance might soothe him. "What is it you have upon your mind? You know I'll do anything I can to help you."

"I know that, laddie. You've been a good friend to me, an' now, please

God, I'm going to do a good stroke for you. Help me to sit up a bit."

I lifted him up by placing my arm under his shoulders, and when I had propped the pillows behind him, took my seat again.

"You remember the time I left you to go and try my luck on that new field down South, don't you?"

I nodded. "Well, I went down there and worked like a galley slave for three months, only to come off the field a poorer man than I went on to it. It was never any good, and the whole rush was a fraud. Having found this out I set off by myself from Kalamian Township into the West, thinking I would prospect round a bit before I tackled another place. Leaving the Darling behind me I struck out for the Boolea Range, always having had a sort of notion that there was gold there, some part of the country if only folk could get at it."

He panted, and for a few moments I thought he would be unable to finish his story. Large beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead, and he gasped for breath, as a fish does when first taken from the water. Then he pulled himself together and continued:

"Well, for three months I lived among those lonely hills, for all the world like a black fellow, never seeing a soul for the whole of that time. You must remember that for what's happened until I came to my senses, in the same room and bed which had been occupied by Ben, some three weeks later, I was so weak then that I felt more of a desire to die and be done with it, than to continue the fight for existence. But my constitution was an extraordinary one, I suppose, for little by little I regained my strength, until, at the end of six weeks, I was able to leave my bed and hobble into the verandah. All this time the story of Ben's mine had been hammering in my brain. The chart he had given me lay where I had placed it before I was taken ill, namely, in my shirt pocket, and one morning I took it out and studied it carefully. What was it worth? Millions or nothing? But that was a question for the future to decide."

Before putting it back into its hiding place I turned it over and glanced at the back. To my surprise there was a large blot there that I felt prepared to swear had not been upon it when Ben had given it to me. The idea disquieted me exceedingly. I cudgelled my brains to find some explanation for it, but in vain. One thought made me gasp with fright. Had it been abstracted from my pocket during my illness? If this were so I might be forestalled. I consoled myself, however, with the reflection that, even if it had been examined by strangers, no harm would be done, for beyond the bare points of the compass it contained no description of the place, or where it was situated; only the plan of a creek, a dotted line running five hundred paces north-west and a black spot indicating a blasted

gum tree. As Ben had given me my directions in a whisper, I was convinced in my own mind that it was quite impossible for anyone else to share my secret.

A week later I settled my account with Gibbs, and having purchased sufficient stores from him to carry me on my way, saddled my horses and set off across country for the Boolea Range. I was still weak, but my strength was daily coming back to me. By the time I reached my destination I felt I should be fit for anything. It was a long and wearisome journey, and it was not until I had been a month on the road that I sighted the range some fifty miles or so ahead of me. The day following I camped about ten miles due north of it, and had the satisfaction of knowing that next morning, all being well, I should be at my destination. By this time the idea of the mine, and the possibility of the riches that awaited me, had grown upon me to such an extent that I could think of nothing else. It occupied my waking thoughts, and was the continual subject of my dreams by night. A thousand times or more, as I made my way south, I planned what I would do with my vast wealth when I should have obtained it, and to such a pitch did this notion at last bring me that the vaguest thought that my journey might after all be fruitless hurt me like positive pain.

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