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LOCAL COLOR

By Jack London.

"I do not see why you should not turn this immense amount of unusual information to account," I told him. "Unlike most men equipped with similar knowledge, you have expression. Your style is—"

"Is sufficiently—er—journalistic," he interrupted suavely.

"Precisely! You could turn a pretty penny."

But he interlocked his fingers meditatively, shrugged his shoulders, and dismissed the subject.

"I have tried it. It does not pay. It was paid for and published," he added, after a pause. "And I was also honored with sixty days in the Hobo."

"The Hobo?" I ventured.

"The Hobo. . . . He fixed his eyes on my Spencer and ran along the titles while he cast his definition. "The Hobo, my dear fellow, is the name for that particular place of detention in city and county jails, wherein are assembled tramps, drunks, beggars, and the riffraff of petty offenders. The word itself is a pretty one, and it has a history. Hautbois—there's the French of it. Haut, meaning high, and bois, wood. In English it becomes hautboy, a wooden musical instrument of two foot tone, I believe, played with a double reed; an oboe, in fact. You remember in 'Henry IV'?"

"The case of a treble hautboy was a mansion for him, a court."

"From this to ho-boy is but a step, and for that matter the English used the terms interchangeably. But—and mark you, the leap paralyzes one—crossing the Western Ocean, in York City hautboy, or ho-boy, becomes the name by which the night scavenger is known. In a way one understands its being born of the contempt for wandering players and musical fellows. But see the beauty of it! The burn and the brand! The night scavenger, the pariah, the miserable, the despised, the man without caste—and in its next incarnation, consistently and logically, it attaches itself to the American outcast, namely, the tramp. Then, as others have mutilated its sense, the tramp mutilates its form, and ho-boy becomes exultantly hobo. Wherefore, the large stone and brick cells, lined with double and triple-tiered bunks, in which the law is wont to incarcerate him, he calls the Hobo. Interesting, isn't it?"

And I sat back and marveled secretly at this encyclopaedic-minded man, this Leith Clay-Randolph, this common tramp who made himself at home in my den, charmed such friends as gathered at my small table, outshone me with his brilliance and his manners, spent my spending money, smoked my best cigars, and selected from my ties and studs with a cultivated and discriminating eye.

He absently walked over to the shelves and looked into Loria's "Economic Foundations of Society."

"I like to talk with you," he remarked. "You are not indifferently schooled. You've read the books and your economic interpretation of history, as you choose to call it" (this with a sneer) "eminently fits you for an intellectual outlook on life. But your sociologic judgments are vitiated by your lack of practical knowledge. Now I, who know the books, pardon me, somewhat better than you, know life, too. I have lived it, naked, taken it up in both my hands and looked at it, and tasted it, the flesh and the blood of it, and, being purely an intellectual, I have been biased by neither passion nor prejudice. All of which is necessary

moods was even capable of permitting especially nice-looking tramps to sit on the back stoop and devour lone crusts and forlorn and forsaken chops. But that a tatterdemalion out of the night should invade the sanctity of her kitchen kingdom and delay dinner while she set a place for him in the warmest corner, was a matter of such moment that the Sunflower went to see. Ah, the Sunflower, of the soft heart and swift sympathy! Leith Clay-Randolph threw his glamour over her for fifteen long minutes, while I brooded with my cigar, and then she fluttered back with vague words and the suggestion of a cast-off suit I would never miss.

"Surely I shall never miss it," I said, and I had in mind the dark gray suit with the pockets dragged from the freightage of many books, books

"Five," I corrected, "counting in the dark gray fishing outfit with the dragged pockets."

"And he has none, no home, nothing—"

"Not even a sunflower"—putting my arm around her—"wherefore he is deserving of all things. Give him the black suit, dear—nay, the best one, the very best one. Under high heaven for such lack there must be compensation!"

"You are a dear!" And the Sunflower fluttered to the door and looked back alluringly. "You are a perfect dear."

And this after seven years, I marvelled, till she was back again, timid and apologetic.

"I—I gave him one of your white shirts. He wore a horrid cheap cotton thing, and I knew it would look ridiculous. And then his shoes were so slipshod, I let him have a pair of yours, the old ones with the narrow caps—"

"Old ones!"

"Well, they pinched horribly, and you know they did."

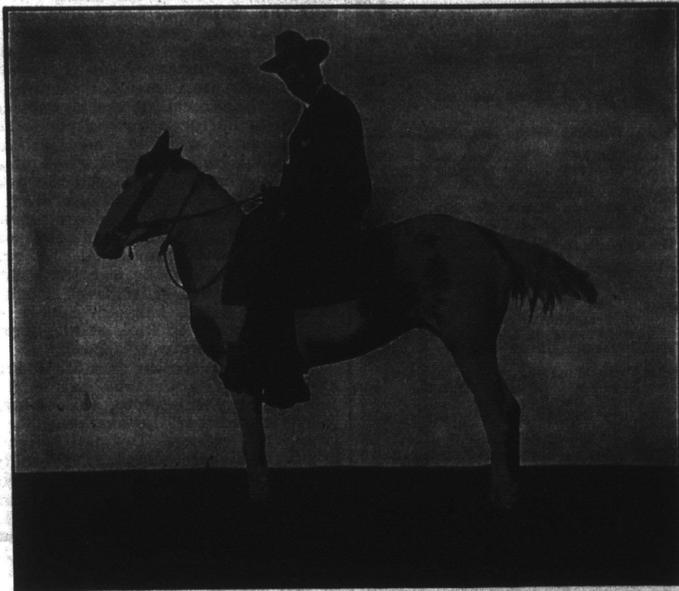
It was ever thus the Sunflower vindicated things.

And so Leith Clay-Randolph came to Idlewild to stay, how long I did not dream. Nor how often, for like an erratic comet he came and went. Fresh he would arrive, and cleanly clad, from grand folk who were his friends as I was his friend, and again, weary and worn, he would creep up the briar-rose path from the Montanas or Mexico. And without a word, when his wander-lust gripped him, he was off and away into that great mysterious underworld he called "The Road."

"I could not bring myself to leave until I had thanked you, you of the open hand and heart," he said on the night he donned my good black suit.

And I confess I was startled when I glanced over the top of my paper and saw a lofty-browed and eminently respectable-looking gentleman, boldly and carelessly at ease. The Sunflower was right. He must have known better days for the black suit and white shirt to have effected such a transformation. Involuntarily, I arose to my feet, prompted instinctively to meet him on equal ground. And then it was the Clay-Randolph glamour descended upon me. He slept at Idlewild that night, and the next night, and for many nights. And he was a man to love. The Son of Anak, otherwise Rufus the Blue-Eyed, and also plebeianly known as Tots, rioted with him from briar-rose path to farthest orchard, scalped him in the haymow with barbaric yells, and once, with Pharisaeic zeal, was near to crucifying him under the attic roof beams. The Sunflower would have loved him for the Son of Anak's sake, had she not loved him for his own. As for myself, let the Sunflower tell, in the times he elected to be gone, of how often I wondered when Leith would come back again, Leith the Lovable.

Yet he was a man of whom we knew nothing. Beyond the fact that he was Kentucky-born, his past was



A Land Seeker in the Canadian West.

for clear concepts, and all of which you lack. Ah! a really clever passage. Listen!"

And he read aloud to me in his remarkable manner, paralleling the text with a running criticism and commentary, lucidly wording involved and lumbering periods, casting side and cross lights upon the subject, introducing points the author had blundered past, and objections he had ignored, catching up lost ends, flinging a contrast into a paradox and reducing it to a coherent and succinctly stated truth—in short, flashing his luminous genius in a blaze of fire over pages erstwhile dull and heavy and lifeless.

It is long since that Leith Clay-Randolph (note the hyphenated surname) knocked at the back door of Idlewild and melted the heart of Gunda. Now Gunda was cold as her Norway hills, and in her least frigid

which had spoiled more than one day's fishing sport.

"I should advise you, however," I added, "to mend the pockets first."

But the Sunflower's face clouded.

"N-o," she said, "the black one."

"The black one!" This explosively, incredulously. "I wear it quite often. I—I intended wearing it tonight."

"You have two better ones, and you know I never liked it, dear," the Sunflower hurried on. "Besides, it's shiny—"

"Shiny!"

"It—soon will be, which is just the same, and the man is really estimable. He is nice and refined, and I am sure he—"

"Has seen better days."

"Yes, and the weather is raw and beastly, and his clothes are threadbare. And you have many suits—"

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