

DOWN

by Douglas Z. Doty

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With a gentleman, by force of circumstances a jack of all trades, by profession a raconteur!

It was my record when I arrived in England, whither the fame of my tales had preceded me. Almost immediately I received a letter from Lord Brower of Tentowers castle, in Surrey, requesting me to come down to his place, as he was entertaining a large house party.

The castle, founded as a monastery, was a most romantic pile, representing its various towers and wings a succession of architectural periods. Its maze of winding corridors and hidden stairways suggested mystery and invited exploration.

My initial appearance before Lord Brower's guests was to be at dinner, and I spent the last moments before leaving my apartment in reading over the list of topics I had jotted down for use during the evening. A raconteur is expected to fill in every lull, every dull moment. Suddenly there fell upon the quiet of my room these words:

"We must run it up to 5,000 tonight! Do you hear? We must!"

I stared round the room. It seemed as if the sound had come through some wall tapestry in a small alcove. Perhaps the tapestry covered a secret door, but there was no time to investigate. A resplendent footman was waiting to conduct me to Lord Brower's presence.

An interesting lot they were gathered round the dinner table of Tentowers castle that night—that is, they were interesting to me as types for study. As conversationalists they were failures, and the only subjects on which they spoke fluently were cards and horse-

busy explaining the intricacies of poker, after which I watched the guests yield to the fascination of the game. Soon little piles of sovereigns and notes appeared and disappeared at the various tables. Excitement grew apace, and the very faces of the players were transformed. The greed of gain was upon them. It was my first glimpse of the English aristocrat at his private gaming table.

Finally interest centered at the table where Marchand and young Chadwick held forth alone. At the beginning Chadwick had won, and with a triumphant gesture he would haul in his little pile of gold. The liquor had brought a sparkle to his eye and daring to his tongue, for he kept Mrs. Marchand close to his side, declaring her to be his mascot and casting such languishing glances into her perfect blue eyes that I wondered at Captain Marchand's calmness. When Chadwick won, she clapped her hands in girlish glee, and once or twice I caught a cynical smile on Marchand's lips. Clearly her presence was going to Chadwick's head. He played recklessly.

"I'll make it 5,000!" exclaimed the captain.

A hush fell on the room. Then rose Mrs. Marchand's clear, sweet voice:

"How exciting! Oh, Mr. Chadwick, go him one better! Make it 5,000!"

The other guests rose and gathered round the table. Lord Brower stood on the hearth rug, glancing toward the group with troubled eyes. I heard him say under his breath:

"The lad can't afford to lose that amount."

I joined the spectators just as Chadwick called for another card. Then I felt a thrill pass over me. The blood rushed to my face, and instinctively I clinched my fist.

Mrs. Marchand was gently tapping the back of Chadwick's chair, but it was no longer the tattoo of an absent-minded individual. Each tap meant something. She was telegraphing Chadwick's hand to her husband!

My first impulse was to denounce them then and there, but what was the word of a hired entertainer against that of distinguished guests, people of social standing, as any of Lord Brower's friends must be? Then came the inspiration. With something of the captain's cynical smile, I too, commenced to drum on the back of a chair, and this was what reached the startled couple:

"You-are-caught!"

The captain turned rigid as he grasped the arms of his chair, and for a single instant his eyes, expressing rage, hate and fear, met mine. I smiled grimly, enjoying the situation. The coup had a different effect on Mrs. Marchand. She faltered away, at which the captain's composure returned. He sprang to her rescue, and the table was overturned.

When Mrs. Marchand recovered, the guests clamored for the finish of the game, but Marchand shook his head, perhaps because I drummed a rhythmic warning. "Don't play!"

I sat in my room an hour later, cogitating whether I should inform Lord Brower that he was entertaining a pair of clever tricksters, when a servant brought me a message from Marchand asking an interview in his room.

I found him waiting for me with an ugly scowl on his face, but his wife, pale and with her hair in artistic disarray, was charming in her new role of beauty in distress.

Marchand came directly to the point. "Well, what do you intend to do?"

"Nothing," I replied nonchalantly.

"It is your play. If you and your charming wife are suddenly summoned to London tomorrow, the matter ends. Otherwise I think Lord Brower!"

I shrugged my shoulder significantly.

"And by the way, it might be just as well if you refunded to Chadwick the money you've won since he's been playing with you."

"And then?"

Madam's hands were working nervously.

"And then I shall have one more good after dinner story—to tell when I return to America; that is all. Lord Brower shall never know."

"You are very generous," replied the lady, with tears in her eyes. "You can have no idea to what straits we, my husband and I, have been driven." She was playing her part well.

"We were raised to love the good things of life. Both thought the other had money, and both have made the best of a bad bargain. We have lived upon the losses of our aristocratic friends until we met you, and now!"

With a well simulated sob she bowed her head among the pillows. Captain Marchand rose and opened the door. His politeness was elaborate.

"You will pardon Mrs. Marchand's lack of self control. As you say, I think a trip to London is what she needs, what we both need. Good night, my dear sir."

I stepped backward toward the door which he held open, my glance, which I know must have held some amusement at the clever acting of his wife, still fixed on the weeping lady. Then suddenly I felt myself going down, down. I clutched at space, and from above me came a mocking laugh. Then a shock, a blinding light in my eyes, and—blackness!

When I woke, dim rays of light penetrated into a stony cellar where I lay, practically a prisoner, for one leg was broken and I was bruised from head to foot. Rats ran along the ledges in the masonry, and bats hung from the rafters above.

It must have been hours before help came to me, but I lost all reckoning of time. When at last I was carried to my room and medical aid was summoned, I learned from Lord Brower that my being alive was nothing short of a miracle. I had fallen three flights into a stone dungeon, one of the numerous pitfalls which abounded in this ancient pile. The captain had suddenly guided me to the secret door which was one of his characteristic discoveries.

Lord Brower heard with amazement my tale of their treachery and trickery, but the scandal never became public. British pride stepped in at this point, the deeply annoyed master of Tentowers making ample reparation for my loss of time and suffering. And the only reason for telling of the story is that during my recent trip to London I recognized in one of the reigning stage beauties Mrs. Captain Marchand, who once telegraphed a poker hand to her fellow trickster at Tentowers castle.

MILES' GIFT

By Fritz Korsmeyer

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When the maid opened the door, a gust of December wind, carrying with it a few flakes of snow, followed the tall, stiff form of Crancer through the vestibule and into the hall. As the maid had spent years in the service of the Garisons, she ventured a restrained "Good evening," but Crancer calmly stalked by her over to the hall tree. When he had put aside his things and turned to her again, she said:

"Mr. Robert is in his room, sir. Shall I tell him you are here, or will you?"

"I'll go up. He's expecting me."

At the head of the stairs he knocked at his friend's room and entered.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, old man; ready in a few minutes. Sit down and make yourself comfortable, won't you?"

Crancer took the proffered cigar and smoked in silence a few minutes while his friend worked at his cravat.

"I had a rather peculiar talk with Miles today," began Crancer in a tone that led Garrison to stop whistling and mumble an encouraging monosyllable; "happened to meet him on the street, you know, just as I was going into Hope's to look at a few Christmas things. He had such a long face on that I thought he needed jollying up a bit. Not like him to need cheering, is it?"

"Scarcely," assented Garrison, with an uneasy laugh. "But of course you know that Charlie has had some occasion to look glum lately."

"Oh, yes; I've heard the family fortunes have been rather going to pot. Well, as I said, I started in to chaff him about Christmas gifts. I bought a few trifles, but most of the time I was showing Miles things that I said a man with a fiancée ought to be interested in, and he was. Several times I thought he was on the point of buying something worth giving, but he finally said he couldn't decide. We walked up the street together, and Miles fell to speculating in a general way as to what girls expected of their fiancés at Christmas time. He seemed to want my opinion. Queer of him to come to me with that sort of talk, wasn't it, Bob?"

"Yes, but I suppose he thought you didn't know enough about his affairs to suspect that he was talking of his own case. Men who are in love always talk glittering generalities, while they haven't a thing in mind but their own particular affair, supposing other people won't know it. What did you tell him?"

"Well, I said it depended largely upon what girls had been taught to expect. From that we drifted into a discussion as to what a man should do when his prospects changed during his engagement. Miles said that to the sort of girl a man would really care for it would make no difference. Good Lord—the sort of girl a man would really care for! I told him a man never knows what kind of girl he is likely to care for or what kind he is caring for, so far as that goes, and I said that if I were engaged to a girl I wouldn't take any chances at Christmas. He responded rather weakly that most girls of our acquaintance already had everything they wanted."

"Which is quite true," put in Garrison.

"Oh, yes, true as far as it goes, but you know very well that the average girl likes to think her lover has searched the town over for something out of the ordinary. Now, we men know that nothing remains to be bought as a Christmas gift that we wouldn't just as soon be without, but women don't know it and never will, and so they

go on, expecting joyous astonishment every year."

"Still, I don't believe Martha's just like other girls in that respect."

"Oh, I don't mean that she cares particularly for what Miles may give her. If I may touch on such matters, but wouldn't any girl of the proper spirit expect— By the way," Crancer broke off, interrupting himself and glancing toward the half open door, "I saw a light across the hall when I came up. Is that?"

"Yes, that's Martha's room, but I think she's down stairs," Garrison went to the door and called his sister's name. Receiving no response, he returned.

"Her door was open, but she didn't answer, so she isn't up stairs. Shall we go now?"

At the foot of the stairs they encountered Miles, who had just come in. The three men chatted a moment. Then young Garrison and Crancer went out. Miles thought Martha looked at him more seriously than usual as she gave him her hand, but her eyes were bright, and when she spoke there was a touch of gaiety in her voice.

"Sit by the fire, won't you?" she urged. "You must be nearly frozen. I like snow for Christmas, but without this freezing temperature." She pushed a chair nearer the fire and then crossed to a stand where huge roses were nodding over the edge of a cut glass jar and gathered them in her arms.

"How do you always manage to find the most perfect blossoms for me, Charles?" the girl asked indistinctly, her face hidden in the roses. She raised her head for an answer, but the man was looking into the fire. She moved the stand nearer him.

"I want these close up this evening. Don't you think they should be?"

"Why don't you remove me for being sentimental, as you always do? Or are you already under the influence of tomorrow and kindly disposed toward every one, even me?"

"Even you, now, Martha!"

"Oh, well, I'll take it back if you don't like it," she hastened to say, laughing, then in a tone of almost bantering tenderness: "My dear, I wanted to tell you about some plans for tomorrow, but how can I talk Christmas when you are in such a solemn state? You'd dishearten Santa Claus himself."

"I've been thinking," answered Miles slowly, "that perhaps you and I have thought the roses—may have taken them in a way—may perhaps have misunderstood them a little." He rose, took a few steps around the room and then began again with better courage.

"It occurred to me after I had sent them that as they would arrive this evening you might not take them as—my gift. I must tell you something that has been troubling me for a long time. They are not quite the same with father and me as they were when I first met you. Perhaps you knew it."

There was a questioning inflection in his last words. The girl's face had paled a little, but just the faintest smile curved her lips. She was gazing steadfastly at the rose jar, on which her hand rested, and she made no answer.

"Until Christmas came I did not realize the change in our prospects," he went on steadily. "Perhaps I did not want to think of that, but if it does make a difference, why, then?"

Martha was looking straight into his eyes, with an expression of infinite tenderness.

"It has made a difference, Charles, all the difference in the world. I have been working for weeks what you would like for a Christmas gift, and what you have said tonight solves the problem." There was a queer little catch in her voice, but she went on bravely. "I've decided, sweetheart, to give you that which I think you need most of all—my hand crept tremulously into his—"myself."

Miles stared at her in a dazed fashion, and she smiled at him gently.

"I realize now, dear, how selfish I was to insist on being a June bride just because my mother and Nell had been married in June. The family will all be here tomorrow, even Aunt Helen from Toronto. Over our course it would be such a quiet wedding, no flattery, no gifts, but I thought that now, when you were in—trouble, you might need me—and—"

The next word of fact Miles was alive to the whole glorious meaning of her words now, and, drawing her to him, he murmured brokenly:

"If I need you! Oh, you can't understand how much!"

The Christmas chimes were ringing as Miles left the house. A few moments later Martha stood before the gas log in her own room. A half rueful smile settled about her lips.

"And I haven't even a new white frock that will pass for a wedding dress!" she murmured.

Then she crossed to a quaint chest of drawers and drew forth a bulky package tied with blue ribbons. From a nest of tissue paper she untrapped a man's traveling set in richest silver. Piece by piece she laid it forth on her dressing table, breathing an occasional sigh.

"In the morning early I shall have Nell exchange it for two scarfpins, just alike, for Bob and Crancer. Really, Crancer ought to be best man, if there was such a personage, tomorrow."

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