

PLUS AND MINUS

(Continued from page 13.)

the main street, and lived on coffee, dates, eggs, and black bread, and spent most of the time picking up languages and poking my nose into other people's business. One morning I got up early and sat at the window before sunrise. The sky had been purple all night and was just showing a little pink, and across the road was a big sheep-pen, with high stone walls around it and a heavy, narrow wooden gate. I could look right into it, and see hundreds of sheep packed like sardines in a case, and presently an Arab chief came up all dressed in white with a couple of Nubians behind him. The two were like ebony statues, big, tall, and beautifully built; all they wore was a loin cloth, and they carried gourds for water bottles. I noticed the chief had a big iron key hanging from his girdle, and with this opened the gates. You could hear the old wrought-iron hinges creak a mile away in the stillness, and the Nubians stood one on each side as the sheep came out. There was just room for one at a time, and, as I live, the Nubians had a name for each sheep, and they knew it as they were called, and turned right or left one after the other. Now, mind you, there was not a sound, except the shuffle of their trotters and the queer words these big black men were saying in a curious, guttural chuckle of a voice, and yet the sheep knew their shepherd.

"Pretty soon the yard was empty—that white-clad Arab relocked the gate, and his flocks stood waiting behind the Nubians. Then they turned off into the plains—long, low ridges, just like ground swells covered with short grass. The Arab disappeared, and I watched the others, one going south and the other east. They dwindled as they went, those black pillars with their white

patches following after, until they dropped out of sight behind a lift of the desert. I rubbed my eyes and stared. It seemed somehow that a corner of a curtain had been thrown back and I had had a glimpse into days when Abraham's herdsmen watched their sheep. It seemed as if those same Nubians had been guarding those same flocks in just that way every day since the world was young, and all the time I kept saying to myself: 'The sheep knew their shepherd.' Now that was the most impressive thing I ever saw."

There was a long silence around the fireplace as Stevenson finished. Something of the mystery and beauty of the scene was in the minds of the three and they were loath to part with it, when a door opened and two men entered—one of them was speaking rapidly.

"The whole thing might have been avoided with a fractional loss. It was pure carelessness—alarm system out of order—engines did not arrive till too late. It was a mistake in wiring; got their positives and negatives confused, and there was no current."

Stevenson smiled contentedly across the hearth at the others. "That's it—that's what I was after—for electricity substitute life; we don't know what it is, but we can produce it; and it has, in every case, these elements, apparently conflicting, but, as a matter of fact, absolutely necessary for the performance of work. Otherwise you get a dead wire. If we happen to be positives, we must have our negatives—somewhere, somehow. And in our own cases there seems to be no doubt about it."

"The artist and the blast furnace," put in Hulett.

"The ironmaster and the sheep," chuckled Penrose.

"The manufacturer and the dough-boys," concluded Stevenson.

THE WILDCATTERS

(Continued from page 19.)

With a merry gesture she pressed it upon her ruby lips.

Carl gave an articulated cry, and made a movement as if to prevent her. "There!" she cried, her features all aglow. "Will you take the lucky coin?" It was held to his face.

Ye Gods! how beautiful she was! How passionate! And she had kissed the coin. He could almost catch its fragrance, it was stretched so near him.

"Don't, my God, don't!" came between his tight lips. They were at the end of the room. A palm screen shut them off from the rest, for they had drawn a step or two from the table's edge. The nearest man at the wheel was too busy to notice, or else this tableau had been the curiosity of those present. Carl, conscious of all her power, put out a hand to make her take the fascinating thing back, the forbidden thing that was half-coin and half kiss. His fingers struck it, and the piece dropped to the floor. Carl seized it quickly, and held it tight in his palms. The thing seemed to burn. The hot touch of her lips seemed on it still.

"Let me keep it!" he said in a hoarse, tense voice. Then like a flash Jean Thurston's face came to him blue-eyed and pure.

"No, no, take it!" Carl groaned. "Take it, for God's sake!" The coin was held to her.

Instead, something happened that paralyzed him. Her warm fingers closed round his wrist with a rapturous sensation, which conquered every fibre mental and physical. The flaming light of victory was in Rita's eyes.

"Try the lucky coin for me!" her voice sighed. Her white fingers pressed upwards the wrist that was steel a moment ago. Like a nerveless man he stepped with her to the table, and the next instant he had staked the coin she had kissed.

"Red?" the man asked.

Carl nodded as if in some nightmare.

The wheel turned and he won. Again he staked and won. A third time! The quick passion that had sent his father to a dishonored grave was alight. The hereditary gambling instinct ran like wine through his veins. The touch of white fingers had undone the self-denial of a lifetime. He won! He won! He won! With unsated desire he threw the gold over again and again. Such a run of luck had never been known in the Clan. The whole assembly ceased their own play and gathered round. He won and won! He was staking blindly and unthinkingly. Yet it made no difference. He won! With steady, fiery eyes he played and played. His lips were baked and his cheeks feverish. The chance god was in him. By his side the woman trembled for what she had done.

A burst of applause told the end. He had broken the bank.

"Sir, I congratulate you!" the head manager, smiling savagely, said to him. Carl stared at the man as if demented. Then he turned from the table.

"Your winnings!" the manager said, touching his shoulder and pointing to the pile of bank-notes. "They will be easier carried than gold."

Mechanically Carl took them. O for a fireplace to sink them forever from sight! Rita's chatelaine hung from her arm, and he seized it. To get them out of sight, to hide these awful, accusing notes was his thought. They bulged the bag to its full capacity, and he snapped it viciously shut.

Then he wondered why another burst of applause went round.

The look in Rita's eyes was unfathomable.

"You have done it," she murmured, meaning the breaking of the bank.

"Yes, I have," Carl said in tones which were like those of a swimmer suddenly choked by the rushing surf.

"But, my God, what have you done?"

(To be continued.)

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