

THE PRICE

By A. C. ALLENSON

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In a long lounge chair, set beneath the broad-leaved foliage of the trees, Peggy Langham lay, her eyes closed, though she was not sleeping. She wore a dainty dress of some thin, white material, for the Egyptian day was hot. Delicately fragile as some piece of exquisite porcelain, she seemed. Her face was ivory-white; the luxuriant dark hair, sweeping back over the blue-veined temples, emphasizing its marble pallor. The ample forehead, firmly chiselled nose, decided mouth, and well-rounded, strong chin, had the classic beauty in which mental power and spiritual fineness are wedded to physical charm. A deep crimson rose nestled in the bosom of her dress. Her hands folded over the open book on her lap, moved, now and again, nervously. Her eyelids twitched uneasily.

Suddenly, with an impatiently restless movement of her languorous body, she opened her eyes. They were large, black, tender. One saw in them, oddly enough, both courage and fear, the nervous fear of a naturally courageous woman, stricken down.

The garden was a high-walled, shrub-beried yard, rather than a place of flowers. Beyond it the Nile and the far-stretching flat landscape merging in the desert. Between this and the Langham's house were the dotted tents of a British Highland regiment, giving a comforting sense of strong protection. She was still day-dreaming when the light, quick footfall of her maid roused her. The girl was not alone; there was a man's heavier step too.

Peggy was about to rise from the chair, when the visitor called to her:

"Don't rise, Peggy, it is only I!" A new light came into her eyes, a glow of colour spread beautifully over her face.

The man was good to look on, young, sun-tanned, vigorous, an air of quick-moving eagerness about him. He was dressed in well-cut white cloth, that set off his compactly-knit figure to great advantage. In Peggy's eyes he was much better than good-looking.

Power, success, seemed to radiate from Hugh Dunstan. He was in big business, New York his headquarters, the world his field.

Sometimes she half wondered whether he were not too absorbed in business; he appeared to think of nothing else. In this she did not include herself. She was not jealous of his commercial interests, for he was a most devoted lover, the loyalest of them all. She dismissed the thought when it rose, attributing it to the fact that she was a Southerner, temperamentally and traditionally of a more leisurely race. There was something invigorating in his wonderful energy. Always some problem to solve, some conquest to achieve, some great end to gain, some rival to overcome. Life was all action—quick, strong, decisive—with one purpose in view—trade, victory, dollars.

"Hugh! Hugh!" she exclaimed, and the welcome in her words, in her eyes, would have satisfied the most exacting lover.

He glanced around. The maid had left. There were no windows on that side of the house. The wall was very high. There came the light of shy laughter into her eyes. He bent down, lifted her in his strong arms, and held her close to his breast, his kisses raining on her closed eyes and sweet trembling mouth. It was nearly three years since he had seen her. She had gone abroad with her parents after a motor accident that had nearly proved fatal, seeking in change of scene to recover her health of body and mind. He had, at about the same time, been sent on a long business journey to Japan and China to develop the Pacific trade of the house with which he was connected.

HE now restored her, a little breathless, to her chair, and seated himself by her. She asked him about his travels. He had written and cabled her very frequently, but she wished to hear all about them from his lips, China, Japan and India, on his way to see her. It had been a most successful trading pilgrimage. His house had greatly praised him, and there was promise of rich, permanent reward when he reached home. He proposed to visit Spain, and then there were France and England, with their rich war contracts. Contracts and Dollars!

The War! Yes, it was horrible, hideous, but the world would soon come to its senses and realise the crazy wastefulness of it all.

"But Egypt has not done much for you, Peggy," he said. Her fragility had shocked him more than he had permitted himself to show. The colour came back again to her cheeks.

"No," she answered. "Sometimes I get a little discouraged and—and—" she paused.

"And—what, Peggy?" he asked.

"I think it is not fair to you, Hugh," she answered. "I don't get any better. Day after day, week after week, and now year after year."

"Fair to me!" he exclaimed. "I am going to take you away from this land, a graveyard turned into a barracks. Why, Peggy, don't you realize that life would not be life without you? I have been hungering and thirsting for you. You will come with me away from this place, and business shall stand aside until you are yourself again. It has been a long, long waiting, but there shall be no more separation. I want you, Peggy, and I am conceited

"You dearest comforter!" she said gratefully. "I want to get away from this Egypt. It has been a land of nightmare alarm to me. The war caught us here, and I was very ill, so ill the doctors, you know, would not allow me to be moved. Then came all the evil rumours. The Arabs were to sweep over the land, there was to be a Holy War, Mohammedan against Christian, following the proclamation of the Turkish Sultan, the Nationalists were to blot out British rule. Then came the advance of the Turco-German forces against Suez."

"And all came to nothing," he smiled.

"Yes, that all passed," she said. "We thought we could get away, as Americans and neutrals, under our own flag. You know what happened."

"We saw ships sail away, in some cases with friends aboard. They were torpedoed. Women and children escaping in boats were shelled. We have seen some of the survivors brought back here, wounded women, maimed children! It was too horrible for words—and the fears came back again to me. I have tried to conquer them; I have reasoned with myself, but they remain. I am not afraid of death itself. Sometimes it seems terribly easy. But that death in the sea! The sudden death rising from the waves, stealthily, murderously killing and leaving one there to drift in the wash of the dreary sea!"

She sat up and leaned forward and he knew how real the fear was to her brave heart.

"No one shall force you, or try to force you to go, Peggy," he said, taking and holding her hand.

"You mean it, Hugh?" she asked eagerly. "Don't let them try to persuade me or reason with me, or be practical and strong-minded. Champion me in all my silly unreasonableness. Will you, Hugh?"

"Can you doubt it, dearest?" he answered. "You shall stay here and I will stay with you until you wish to go away."

She lay back in her chair again, a great quiet and content on her face.

"And business? That great, all-absorbing business?" She laughed quietly.

"I deserve a holiday," he returned. It was not the answer she had expected. Then she rebuked herself for seeking assurances of that which she knew beyond all doubt. "And there are greater matters than business. There is you, Peggy, greatest of all," he added.

She was satisfied. Then her father and mother arrived and the intimate conversation ceased.

DUNSTAN cabled home for leave of absence. He had been three years without a holiday. His long trip had been practically concluded. It had been a great triumph in the difficult field wherein business, politics, diplomacy blended. After the war, the hour of the Far East would come. European nations, war-impo- verished, trade-hungry, organised as never before for business conquest, would turn to the vast, scarcely-touched fields of the East—China, with her huge territory and her 400,000,000 population greatest

among them. The day of the Pacific had come. The canal was open. Not only to the western shores of the American Continent, but to the Atlantic seaboard, had the road been made. Japan was making tremendous efforts to get the lion's share of the feast. The war had vastly enriched her. She had kept full faith with her Allies, but this had not been costly to her, either in money or men, and trade control in China was her purpose.

In this field, Dunstan had done his work, laying foundations for after-war trade, and securing all the present business that shipping could take care of. The reply to his wire left him to take what holiday he wished. He desired to marry Peggy at once, but she put his importunities aside. It was a great temptation. The absoluteness of his devotion touched her deeply, but her sense of justice was strong as her love. He should not be burdened with a sick wife, that she was fully resolved on. A whimsical, nerve-shaken woman should not be allowed to handicap his energy and freedom. He was very persistent and no woman yet, in love with the man of her choice, found fault with this highest tribute to his affection's ardour.

Egypt was new to Hugh; a fascinating treasure-house, the vigour of the new time touching and linking hands with the crowded ages, now so still and quiet in their eternal calm. The changing time and the (Continued on page 58)



enough to think that you want me," and he bent over and kissed her again.

It was very comforting to listen to his assurances, but Peggy was very nervous and uneasy.

"There is something I want to ask you, Hugh," she said. "You cannot understand what rank, bleak cowardice is. If you could perform another Egyptian miracle and cleave the Mediterranean as the Red Sea was divided, I think I could go. Since the accident at home there has been a great change in me. Before that, fear was something I hardly understood, since that time life has been crowded with it. It is a shameful confession to have to make."

"As shameful as a fever or a paralyzed limb," he replied.

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