

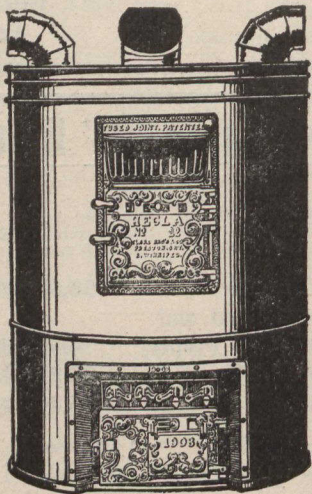
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OUT OF THE SHADOW

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

"You — know all?" he gasped, hoarsely.

"All!" she replied, sobbing, her forced strength falling suddenly away from her. "Oh, Frank!" she wailed, "why didn't you trust me? Why couldn't you trust me?"

* * * * *

The inevitable climax came. The next few weeks witnessed the dis-traint upon Frank's belongings, and the exchange of home, if the shabby apartments to which he took his sick wife could be so designated. With the shadow of a still greater evil hovering over her, Laura faced the crisis almost unmoved. She saw, too, that Frank needed all the support which her loving sympathy alone could lend him.

As the lengthening days of February drew to a close, the long-looked-for situation was found for Frank, and the most pressing debts were paid off. But his remorse was not strong enough to exercise the gambling spirit which had obtained fast possession of him. He was still waiting for the run of luck which Fate, with a curious persistency, denied him.

"In March," he told Laura, "the Lincoln Handicap and the Grand National come off. I've got a 'double' on Wanderer and Apple Chip. One thousand pounds it will bring in! I raked the money together," he added, shifting his eyes uneasily. "Something tells me I shall pull it off this time. You'll see."

He shook off a feeling of chill which had seized him at the thought of money "raked together"—a considerable slice of his month's salary, advanced by his employer to meet "pressing demands." Wanderer was going to prove a stunning surprise. Withers had assured him; the public had yet to learn his powers. Withers had got the tip on infallible authority. He put six pounds five on Wanderer and Apple Chip, at one hundred and sixty to one, satisfying a dramatic instinct to bring the possible haul up to the round sum of one thousand pounds exactly.

On Tuesday, at the end of the month, the Lincoln Handicap was run. Wanderer fulfilled the prophecies, and came in first! Frank reeled home that evening like a drunken man, the blood surging wildly through his veins beating like drums in his burning temples.

He talked to himself half aloud as he pushed his way through the thronged streets. A thousand pounds! If only Apple Chip were lucky! What could he do with a thousand pounds? What could he not do with it? It would buy a house and new furniture, and a thousand little luxuries to smooth away the furrows from Laura's brow, and win back the pretty smiles that had first made captive his heart. And he must get her away from London, while there was yet hope for her; out of the sleet and the icy blast that was cutting on his own throbbing head gratefully enough.

On reaching home he found Laura feverish and alarmingly ill, and, for the first time, the fear of immediate danger seized him with a numbing grip that banished all thought of the coming Grand National from his mind.

On the day of the race he sat by his wife's bedside in dazed misery. by moments only, vivid flashes of consciousness that came to him like a stunning blow, he realised that she was slipping away from him on the ebb tide of her life, a current, the stemming of which was out of his power, even with the aid of a thousand pounds. Outside, in the street,

rose up the hoarse cries of the suburban hawker, and, later on, the voice of the newsboy, crying the familiar "Winner! Winner!" The sounds fell on his ears without meaning. The Grand National had been run, but there was a greater and more absorbing race going on in the shabby little bedroom—a contest between life and death, and the odds were on the grim spectre.

Laura stirred at the sound of the boy's shrill voice. He had thought her sleeping; but she had been thinking of the life stretching out before him, bereft of her restraining hand. It had restrained but little in life, she feared, unconscious of the full weight of her influence over him, but there was a hope in her death. She fought down the longing to spare him and herself.

"Dearest!" she faltered.

He gripped her hand and remembered, tempering the grasp with the tightening of the clutch at his heart.

"You would like to do something—one last thing, especially for my sake—to make me very happy?" she asked with a wilful pleading that wrung his heart.

He writhed in his chair, knowing what words were coming, yet dreading to hear them.

"Heaven knows!" he answered, helplessly.

"Then promise—promise me now."

He looked up imploringly.

"Say, I will never bet again in all my life!" she entreated, her eyes dilating in the force of her supplication.

He bowed his head as if struck, choking back the tears that thickened his voice:

"It's too late—too late!" he groaned. "What does anything matter now?"

Her own tears rained down silently. "No, no!" she said. "It is not too late. Promise—promise, for my sake!"

"Heaven help me!" he said, brokenly. "I promise."

He went downstairs, trying to shake off the grip on his throat that was choking him. He found Withers, waiting admission at the front door.

"Have you seen the paper?" his friend demanded, excitedly.

"Paper? No!" replied Frank, indifferently. "What is it?"

Withers thrust a crumpled evening paper in his face. "Look, then!" he almost screamed. "Apple Chip! won by a neck! Your thousand pounds! Are you deaf?"

Frank took the paper, reading the results through slowly. He thought the Grand National must have been run yesterday, so long had the time been since sunrise. He sat down, looking at Withers almost vacantly.

"It's too late now," he said sullenly. "She's going!"

Withers looked shocked for a moment, but, for himself, he was wedded only to the passion for gambling. He shifted uneasily, unable to quell his excitement.

"Who knows?" he exclaimed, with assumed cheerfulness. "Money can work wonders. Buck up, old chap! Where's your voucher?"

Frank sorted out the papers in his breast pocket, handing him the voucher mechanically.

"I'll see to it all," said Withers. "Sign the paper. You'll get the money in two days."

All that night Laura lay speechless in Frank's arms, her soft, slow breath coming fainter each hour from the parted lips. As the first stealthy rays of the dawn crept over her face, the last fluttering sigh trembled on

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