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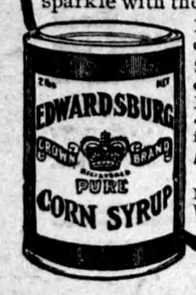

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The Green Seal

By CHARLES EDMONDS WALK

Author of "The Silver Blade," "The Paternoster Ruby," "The Time Lock," etc.

CHAPTER II.—(Cont'd).

The bitter anguish that lay behind these words was more than her strong nature could control.

"Miss Fox—stop!" I cried, aghast—sternly enough to silence her now, too.

Who could have dreamed of such an ending? The revelation, coming at the very instant when every responsive fibre of my being was yielding more and more to the charm of her personality, was staggering. What I had been prepared for, if not expecting, was at worst a recital of indignities offered by previous employers, by way of clumsy warning to me, notwithstanding such an utterance from her was too preposterous to think of it. It implied a lowering of the character I had conceived of as being hers that simply was impossible. She was not the type of girl that any man could take liberties with.

But this, to me—a stranger! How terribly her sensibilities must have been torn and outraged! How high the courage that had enabled her to conquer pride and speak at all!

I am not ashamed to say I was so shaken that it required some moments to pull myself together.

"Miss Fox," I warmly protested at last, "why did you torture yourself with this confidence? It was so uncalled for, so unnecessary!

"Now you listen to me. I'm not trying to employ what you are pleased to call your antecedents, but you. Good gracious, what sort of employers have you had! To see you and talk with you five minutes, as I have, is the only testimonial any man with a modicum of brains or discernment would ask for. Don't interrupt!"—for she seemed about to break in.

"It is a terrible burden for you to have to bear, there is no glossing over that fact. God knows you have my deepest sympathy. I never was so stirred in my life. But if there's any one thing plain, it is that you have risen above a handicap that would have dragged another character less fine and resolute to certain destruction. My dear Miss Fox, you are not to blame. If my friendship counts for anything, you have it."

I paused to recover myself again, and then went on in a tone more matter-of-fact:

"If you want the opening, it is yours—as soon as you are ready to begin. When will you be at liberty?"

She was deeply moved; despite her calm balance, I could see that. Then all at once her eyes were misty; but she smiled bravely—with quivering lips.

"No, I am not going to cry," she assured me, and laughed. After that the tension was gone. "But I am going to say this: one's pride enables one to endure much, but kindness, when unexpected, gets quickly behind and under one's defences. Kindness can hurt as well as mistrust and abhorrence, when you are not looking for it, and I am not used to kindness." Then, in a businesslike way, she abruptly announced: "I can start to work right away."

And so it was settled. Was I quixotic, or rash? Perhaps; but I trust the sequel to justify my determination.

"There!" I said lightly. "I knew you were a sensible girl. Stub will show you where to put your things. If there's anything else you want, you will find him a mine of information."

At the door she paused and thrilled me with a look. I can find no words to describe the soft sweetness of her voice.

"How can I ever thank you!" she said.

"You can't," said I, curtly, to hide a sudden feeling of timidity. "Come back in ten minutes—please."

CHAPTER III.

I suppose it is not to be wondered at that the extraordinary events of that day should have unfitted me for applying myself to anything else, and as I was a pretty busy man at this time I could ill afford to have my settled routine so broken in upon. But, try as I might, it was impossible to keep my attention fixed upon the matters which should have been engaging it; my mind was too full of the diamond and of Miss Fox and her surprising disclosure. Until to-day my life had been quiet and well-ordered, and here I was suddenly brought face to face with a situation—two of them, if the diamond may be considered as affording one—so unusual that I was wholly unprepared and at a loss to cope with either. Consequently I tried to devote myself only to the most pressing concerns, and these were disposed of mechanically, and I fear perfunctorily, while my thoughts were busy adjusting themselves to the new state of affairs.

Ten minutes gave me time to select and assort the letters demanding immediate attention, and when Miss Fox reentered my private room the replies were dictated in an absent-minded fashion that would have produced some queer results had she permitted my lapses to slip by. Contemplation of the glinting lights in her brown hair completely shattered one train of thought.

My preoccupation was discomposing her, I all at once noticed, for naturally enough she divined at least a part of its cause and ascribed to herself the entire blame for all my perturbations. To relieve her I attempted to make light of the matter.

"I thought young ladies delighted in being disturbing factors," I said banteringly.

She colored and did not look at me for a moment; then the gray eyes met mine reproachfully. I hastily added:

"I only wanted to tell you that something else happened to-day to upset me before you came, so don't take your share too much at heart."

She rewarded me with a glance that made my pulses leap strangely; for, not to conceal any part of the truth, her expressive eyes and the rare, brave spirit that shone through them were quite the most disturbing factors of all.

As she rose to go, with her notebook and pencil in hand, I said:

"Please tell Stub that I'm not to be bothered till I ring."

Once more alone, I again brought out the two ivory boxes—the ring with its death-dealing jade set, the diamond and the wrapping of the second box, and set about an earnest, methodical attempt to get behind the mystery.

The idea never occurred to me that the gem might have been only an imitation, its rich splendor but a showy sham to jape and gibe at my excitement. An artificial stone may be so seemingly real as to require the customary tests to confirm the doubt awakened by its artificiality; but when you are confronted by the genuine article, as incomparably pure and flawless as the one that lay upon my blotting-pad, the doubt does not arise at all. Like a magnetic personality, such a diamond is instinct with vitality; it possesses an individuality of its own that infallibly impresses the beholder, requiring no expert eye to determine at once that it is the real thing.

Accordingly, therefore, in spite of my limited knowledge of precious stones, I was not only certain that here in my possession was a perfect blue-white diamond, but also, considering its size and beauty, one of the dozen or so really worth-while diamonds in the whole world.

Think of that for a moment!

And when I further considered the extraordinary way in which it had come to me, and the circumstance that I should have it at all, it is little wonder that I was overcome with amazement and mystification.

Now it is possible for an event to be so unwonted, to be so strange and unusual in itself and so unexpected, that these very attributes overshadow and conceal everything else respecting it. Just such happenings as these it was which our simpler-minded forebears, who were not given to seeking far for causes, ascribed to a supernatural origin; and at that moment I must confess to having felt much the same way, though after a while reason began to search for an explanation more human. The result, if anything, was even yet more baffling.

In the first place, there was nothing whatever in my past associations that hinted in the remotest manner at anybody who would be likely to send me a diamond—not to mention the almost incalculable value of this one. This conclusion was reached with one qualifying reservation: there seemed a distant possibility that some client had entrusted the gem to me for temporary safe keeping; but I viewed this suggestion skeptically, anything but convinced, for who would send such an extraordinary gem through the mail?

While I knew more or less intimately a number of persons who might have afforded such a costly trinket, it was not at all likely that any one of them owned it; if so, the circumstance would have been pretty generally known.

Then, once again, who in his right mind would thus take such a hazardous chance with a fortune? The parcel had not been registered; it even bore no return address; there was nothing whatever pointing to the sender's identity, for the cancelling mark was so blurred as to be a mere smudge.

I was so puzzled and confused and so filled with wonder that I could scarcely force my wits to a rational consideration of the mystery; but in the end I settled upon two points as affording possible clues, namely: the two ivory boxes, considered together, in some unaccountable way associated the diamond with my ring of death; and the address on the parcel had been cut from one of my professional cards and pasted upon the wrapping.

Both items were decidedly unsatisfactory. The circumstance of the two ivory boxes being counterparts of each other might denote the most ordinary coincidence, bearing a corresponding lack of significance. Los Angeles teems with shops where the unwary tourist is inveigled into buying all sorts of useless Chinese and Japanese gimcracks, and for all I knew to the contrary the boxes might be the cheapest of trinkets, turned out wholesale from a common mould. I am informed that most similar articles of virtu are produced in this way.

As for my card, almost anybody might have obtained one, and the fragment used for an address promised nothing whatever—the card simply had been trimmed to fit evenly one side of the package.

One other suggestion did occur to me. There was nothing in the remainder of my mail to account for the diamond, and it was possible that a letter of advice would follow; but this I would have to wait for.

I began putting away the different articles in a desk-drawer—the wrapping with my card, the ring in its box—when a sudden disturbing thought made me pause.

What present disposition should I make of the gem?

It was much too valuable to entrust to my private safe, and the banks were closed. Thus had the afternoon flown.

The idea gave me a moment of apprehensive reflection: was anybody aware that I had the stone? At least one person—the sender—must be extremely anxious to know whether or not it had come safely to my hands. But was anybody else—anybody who shouldn't be—animated by a similar anxiety?

I was filled with misgivings.

Then abruptly a plan came to me: I would conceal the diamond and place the empty box—or, better yet, the box containing the ring—in the safe.

Accordingly, I tore some sheets of tissue-paper from an old letter copying-book, and wrapped the glittering gem into a compact package, which for the time being I slipped into my pocket.

It gave me a queer feeling. It seemed as if nothing might hide its brilliancy from the eye; no amount of wrappings, nor my pocket, nor yet the steel walls of the biggest vault could intercept its sparkle and glow. And this marvel, as if by magic, had come to me!

Since the dawn of time only a handful or so of diamonds have accumulated so choice that they may be said to represent the very acme of material worth, the ultimate possibility of human valuation; these alone bear innately the attributes of kingly grandeur and are the most fitting of all things else mundane to stamp and decorate the high station of royalty. Cull over in your mind the few celebrated gems that bear this distinction, then imagine me carrying one of of the noble parure, as carelessly as if it had been a pebble, in my coat pocket! Great Cæsar! Wasn't it enough to fire the blood and set fancy to rioting, to turn the head of the most sedate and sober-minded? Yea, verily!

These attributes, however, are peculiarly of the earth earthy. The spiritual significance of diamonds, alas, is at best negative. They are the archetypes of all that is cruel and unfeeling. Their brilliancey is the brilliancy of ice; of Sirius shining in the remotest zero of space. They are one with the dark sisterhood, Hate and Jealousy. They are the fons et origo of covetousness, blood-lust and tragedy.

Again I took from the drawer where I had placed it the box containing the ring, and, moved by an impulse I shall not try to account for, raised the lid for a final glimpse at the innocent-looking instrument of death. And I received another shock of surprise.

For a moment I stared at the set in bewilderment. Next, with a startled cry, I dropped the thing back into the box.

The ideograph has already been described as cut into the jade: now, unless my bemused senses were tricking me, the undecipherable symbol stood out in relief!

Truly Mr. Unruh had classified it—it was a thing of the devil.

I concluded that I was in no frame of mind to give the perplexing matter any further consideration that day. I swore in vexation, impatiently clapped down the cover and threw the box into a compartment of my safe. I swung the heavy door to, gave the dial a twirl, and then stood rigid with alarm.

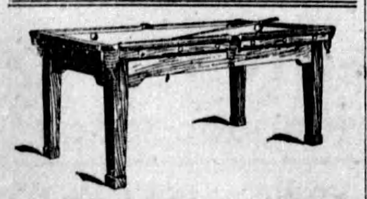
At that instant an exclamation of terror from Miss Fox in the outer room brought me up with a start. I hastened out to discover her seated at the typewriter, white-faced, apparently petrified with horror at something she beheld in the afternoon paper. Judging by Stub's attitude and stupefied expression, he had only just handed it to her. Without removing her staring gaze from the sheet, she slowly and automatically rose up. I hurried over to her.

"What is it?" I demanded—excitedly, I afterwards realized. "What has happened, Miss Fox?"

For a space she seemed not to have heard; but before I could speak again, she turned to me a face drawn with suffering. She did not try to speak; she simply turned the paper so that I could see. And I took in almost at a glance the glaring headlines:

"Steve Willets in Wild Break for Liberty." "Notorious Bandit Heads Successful Plot to Escape San Quentin." "Eludes Guards; TrainWrecker and Four Other Desperate Convicts at Large."

(To be continued.)



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It is a fact not generally known, by the way, that both Mr. Joseph Chamberlain and Mr. Gladstone were so impressed by Mr. Asquith's abilities that he was offered 16 different seats before he finally accepted the invitation to stand for East Fife.

Although in public life somewhat cold and austere, Mr. Asquith in private life is the most genial of men. Like Mrs. Asquith, whom he married in 1894, his first wife having died three years previously, the Premier seeks relaxation in golf. He has two daughters—the elder of whom, Miss Violet Asquith, has just become engaged to Mr. Maurice Bonham-Carter, Mr. Asquith's private secretary—and five sons, four of whom are serving their country in the great war.

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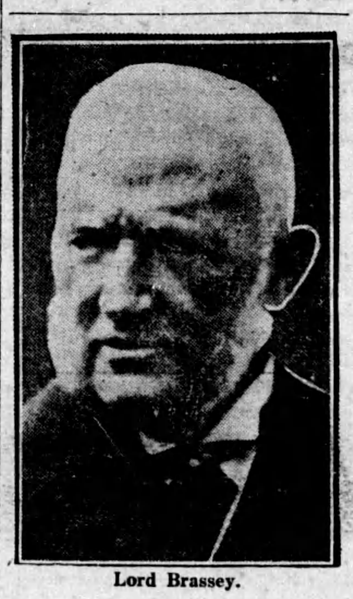
That wonderful old man, Lord Brassey, who is now in his 80th year, has gone to the Dardanelles in his famous yacht Sunbeam, to assist in Red Cross work. His venture is all the more remarkable because the veteran peer is feeling the infirmities of years, and can only walk slowly with the aid of two sticks. But he is full of enthusiasm for the mission he has undertaken, which will add a new and glorious chapter to the history of the Sunbeam, the old-fashioned three-masted yacht in which he has sailed the seven seas, and which is known in almost every quarter of the globe.



Lord Brassey.

PLANS TO STOP WAR BY SWISS.

Proposal to Put German Royal Families in Front Trenches.

The London Chronicle's Zurich correspondent cables that a prize of 500 francs $100) has been offered for the best proposal for arriving at terms of peace, by a Swiss newspaper. It has drawn from its readers a number of original suggestions. One is that all members of reigning German houses should be put into the front line in the trenches, accompanied by all deputies of the Prussian Diet, directors of Krupp's, and members of the Pan-Germanist Association.

In the trenches on the other side should be put the members of the French Camelots du Roi and editors of French nationalist papers. The originator of this suggestion declares that the first volley fired, after all these gentlemen had been placed in position, would insure speedy and satisfactory peace.

A French-speaking Swiss woman proposed that Swiss wives and mothers should band themselves together, under their Federal flag, and call to their side women from all the belligerent countries. The whole army then would march along the front, from the Vosges to Arras, and would interview the generals of the three great armies, demanding the restoration of husbands and sons now serving in the ranks.

Forty-five competitors favor the formation of an army of neutrals, which shall force the combatants to listen to reason.

To overcome the diffidence of each belligerent to make the first proposal it is suggested by one competitor that each belligerent should submit proposals in a sealed envelope. When all have submitted their proposals, the envelopes will be opened simultaneously.

To prevent the outbreak of a similar war in the future one competitor recommends total prohibition of sports, alcohol, betting and gambling, and all other excitements tending to encourage a bellicose state of mind.

Another competitor recommends that all Governments should send all their subjects abroad at public expense in order that they may broaden their minds by travel among foreign peoples.

Madge—"You shouldn't say he's a confirmed bachelor unless you know." Marjorie—"But I do know; I confirmed him."

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