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The Green Seal

By CHARLES EDMONDS WALK

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

CHAPTER XIII.—(Cont'd).

"If I didn't know differently now," she declared, "I would be willing to make solemn oath that this is Aunt Lois's; there is not the least difference between them. And that dreadful ring is really inside it?"

"Bless you, I wouldn't swear to it. I know that I put it there and snapped down the lid—" She looked startled and I stopped.

"Could it have been stolen, do you suppose?" she asked apprehensively.

"I don't think so. In fact, I'm pretty certain that nobody has molested it. I was merely going to say that everything relating to this puzzle has a way of doing the unexpected and the unreasonable—even the impossible—and I shouldn't be at all surprised to see that the ring has transformed itself into something else, or that it has developed a volition of its own and vanished utterly."

"Please don't joke about it," she protested. "I was thinking of what might happen if it fell into somebody's hands who was ignorant of its deadly properties, or somebody acquainted with them who might use it without scruple."

"I have thought of the same thing myself," I responded; "that's why—one of the reasons, at least—I try to keep it hidden.

"But, seriously," I pursued, "what I said is not altogether a joke. While I was first making the ring's acquaintance, the engraved character on the jade set was what is technically known, I believe, as an incised design—that is, cut into the stone. When about to place it in the safe that memorable Saturday afternoon, for some unexplained cause I lifted the lid and took a final glimpse at it. I got a jar that made me think I was seeing crooked: the symbol was no longer incised, but stood out in relief."

"Honestly?" she cried, openly incredulous.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," I solemnly assured her, "if I'm not speaking truth. The circumstance partly reveals the ring's secret. The ideograph is movable. The slightest touch upon the set releases some sort of concealed mechanism that projects the ideograph forcibly outward, possibly an eighth of an inch, and its sharp edges gash the skin just enough to let the deadly poison contained in the hollow metal part enter the blood. Whatever ancient secret toxic it might be, we know that it is swift and sure in its effect, and that it also possesses the property of discoloring the flesh—thus the print of the ideograph is accounted for."

"Isn't it horrible!" gasped my listener.

"My dear girl," I protested eloquently, because I was keenly sensible of the painful train of reflection the ring was bound to awaken in her mind—"my dear girl, why regard it so seriously? If we can't show a brave, healthy contempt for the tools that are the devil's, it means that they have found pliant subjects upon which to work. This lethal jewel, now that we are conversant with its power for evil, is harmless as far as we are concerned. Our defences are up against it, and they are impregnable. It can not cause a ripple in our lives. We scorn its potency. We refuse to take it seriously."

Had it been sentient, how the infernal thing might have grinned at this!

Neither of us, however, had precience to look even a few minutes ahead to the one set for the supreme surprise. With characteristic malevolence, it held back until the moment was ripe, steadfastly refusing to foreshadow what it was to stand for in the life of this beautiful, sweet-tempered girl.

Regardless of the fact that we were discussing a topic about which clung only unpleasant memories, I was enjoying myself immensely. It was seldom we found time thus to sit down together, not as employer and employee, but simply as a man and a woman in whom the tide of youth and a keen zest for the desirable things of life ran high, and I was not reluctant to lengthen the period and let my work go hang.

Truly, I did not realize at the time how strongly I was drawn to her, nor how comfortable and satisfied I was during these bright intervals of relaxation in her company. I have always been one of those unfortunate chaps who are awkward and ungainly in the presence of ladies, and it were far easier for me to relieve Sisyphus than manufacture small talk, or even words to carry on with them a serious conversation; but I was never sensible of this gagging restraint in the presence of Lois Fox.

As for her, I believe she viewed with a calm, happy contentment the footing of sympathetic and discerning friendship into which our constant daily contact and association had ripened. It was unlike anything that had ever come into her life before, and she appreciated and fostered it accordingly. We had, in short, grown to be good pals before we were aware of it.

I began with the time six years previously, when Mr. Unruh, the public administrator, first gave me the ring and told me the circumstances of Charley Yen's death. I recounted all I knew of its history—how it had been found among my father's effects; how fatal it was to anybody touching the green jade set; how it left upon each victim's skin an imprint of the peculiar ideograph which nobody seemed able to decipher, and, in short, everything respecting it that has already been related.

Now, it had not been a part of my purpose to show her the ring, believing that to do so would be asking too much of her fortitude. One does not heedlessly go about showing a refined and sensitive girl the tool by which her father met a dishonorable death—even though she owned no recollection of ever having seen him, held him in abhorrence while he lived, and cherished no veneration for his memory now that he was dead. So I was surprised when she calmly asked to see it.

"I do not ask out of curiosity," she explained on noting my expression. "It may have played some part in my past that I have forgotten; sight of it may awaken my memory."

"True," I agreed. "I believe you ought to look at it."

I opened the box and shook the ring out upon my desk; and the Lord knows that what it did presently awaken we had not the slightest premonition of.

However, Miss Fox first of all drew away from it with an irrepressible shudder of repugnance, yet could not refrain from looking at it with a sort of frightened, fascinated curiosity that made me laugh at her.

"Don't have to warn you not to touch it, do I?" I observed, cautiously picking it up by the metal part and extending it toward her so that she could view the set and the symbol.

She saw it. In a flash the last atom of my enjoyment vanished. A sudden realization of the ring's hidden venom, of its diabolical secret mechanism for dealing death indiscriminately and impartially, of the appalling possibilities for destruction that lay unseen in the harmless looking bit of green jade, swept over me with demoralizing force.

It was emphatically borne in upon me that the thing, after all, was not to be made light of; that its nature was, in very truth, about as wholesome and inviting as a cobra's.

The girl's first half-timid look changed swiftly to a fixed stare. Her eyes widened; the color ebbed from her cheeks, leaving them as pale as tuberoses.

Next instant she went reeling backward toward the wall, where she stood, the back of one hand before her eyes shutting out further sight of the poisonous object, which seemed to bear some awful meaning to her, while the other hand was extended palm outward, as if she feared it was about to leap at her.

The ring dropped from my nerveless fingers to the blotting-pad, and in a palsy of terror I sprang from my chair.

"Good Heavens!" I shouted. "Did the thing touch you?"

"No, no, no!" she answered in a strangled, excited voice. "I'm not hurt."

To some extent she gradually recovered her poise, while I stood trembling and looking helplessly on. What it all meant I had not the faintest conception of, and so my terror was speechless. It was evident that she was shaken to the very pith and marrow of her being. It seemed impossible for her to tear away her gaze from the ring. Her arms lowered, but shudder after shudder continued to shake her body.

Also she seemed to have forgotten my presence, for after a moment I heard her mutter, as if to herself; as if she were confirming in her own mind the now indisputable existence of some hitherto amazing, stupendous, unbelievable possibility. Strange and mystifying words they were ,too, that she uttered.

"The Kiss of the Silent Death! So it's true, then. How awful!—how awful! Now I know what it means."

In the swift reaction from terror, now that I was convinced that she was unharmed, I slumped weakly back into my chair.

"Then for the love of Heaven," I pleaded in a trembling voice, "tell me too."

Seconds passed, and she appeared not to have heard. Then with an obvious effort she wrested her gaze from the ring and looked at me. Her expression was that of one who has seen visions of inferno.

She stood unresponsive until her self-possession was quite restored, then she advanced a step or two closer to me. Without a word she calmly removed her collar, reached back and unfastened some of the upper buttons of her shirtwaist and drew it down in front an inch or two, thus exposing perhaps a hand's breadth of marmoreal loveliness at the base of her rounded throat. No thought of the unconventionality of the act entered either of our heads at that palpitating moment; the occasion was too crowded with portentous possibilities.

"Look," she said tensely, her eyes glowing.

I did, in a blind, uncomprehending way, and next instant was once more starting from my chair.

On the white flesh, like a green tattoo-mark, was an unmistakable imprint of the death seal; the dread sign which, whatever it might mean to those who could read it, had spelt death to all whom it had touched.

Again our eyes met and we looked long into each other's eyes awed to silence. The same dumfounding thought was flooding both our minds, rendering the situation too full for words.

We were thinking of Strang's inquiry about a tattooed design.

CHAPTER XIV.

Notwithstanding Lois's assurance that she had suffered no harm from the ring, I still must have remained panic-stricken but for one thing. The symbol on the satiny white background at the base of her throat was noticeably larger than the symbol on the set, so it could not have been caused by contact with the latter. And when at last I fully realized this fact, I stammered:

"H-h-how in the name of all that's good did that get there?"

Her calmness and self-possession were now in marked contrast with my flustered state. She looked at me clear-eyed as she buttoned her waist again and refastened her collar.

"How can I tell after this? Birthmark, indeed! Aunt Lois has deliberately deceived me about it. That ring tells me that some monstrous cause made her do so. That's what shocked me so—the stunning conviction that I'm doomed to be allied with crime and evil and bloodshed whether I will or not." She laughed a hard, bitter laugh. "If that's my destiny, what's the use of fighting against it?" she added. "Why not be a crook right? I could."

"Lois!"

It was the first time I had ever addressed her by her first name. It leaped from me in an outburst of reproach and honest indignation—not at her so much as at the cruel, unjust conditions that had provoked and aggravated her present dark mood. Yet I was hurt too; I felt that I did not deserve this.

She sank into a chair and began to cry softly. Instinctively I knew that I had said enough, so I remained silent and waited.

I did not have to wait long. She was not demonstrative by nature and quickly gained control of her feelings.

"I did not mean that," she said by and by, "and I was inconsiderate of you to give way like that. But I'm so reckless and miserable that I hope you'll forgive me. You will, won't you?"

Her tone was all at once coaxing; she smiled; I would have forgiven her anything.

"My dear," I said, "my heart is only full of compassion for you. Go on and tell me all about it; you will feel better. Then we can meet whatever's to come like good sports. Don't forget that I'm with you."

"I shan't—again." Then she went on:

"The instant I saw the character on the set of course I recognized it; then I was overwhelmed with the hideous associations of crime and murder and sudden death that it conjured up.

"Why, Mr. Ferrie, just think of it!" She laid a hand upon her bosom. "This must be a tattoo-mark; James Strang knows. But how did he learn of it? Who could have put it there, and for what earthly reason? It's the most perplexing thing I ever heard of!"

It was, indeed. And I could not offer her a grain of comfort, or advance even a reasonable theory to relieve in some degree her troubled mind.

"But sight of the ideograph awoke some other association in your mind," I reminded her presently. "I don't know whether you are aware of it, but you voiced the thought. You uttered some strange words—what do they mean?"

"That is true. I'll explain; then you'll know as much about it as I do.

"At the time I showed you the Strang letters I honestly believed this to be a birthmark. Why shouldn't I? My aunt and foster-mother assured me it was; I can't remember when it wasn't there. It is just the irregular, purposeless sort of figure that most birthmarks are. But my mind flew back to something that happened years ago—when I was a very little tot—and in the light of to-day's revelation it seems to contain a special significance that I can not get.

"I woke up one night with a feeling that somebody had kissed my throat. It was not a startling kiss, but gentle, like a mother's might have been. I was not frightened, only thoroughly, drowsily comfortable in my crib. In a dim, half-waking, half-sleeping way, I saw Aunt Lois bending over me, crying. She was kneeling on the floor.

(To be continued.)

VALUE OF SKIM MILK.

Two and a Half Quarts as Nutritive as a Pound of Beefsteak.

The value of skim milk as a practical and economical food is being urged by the United States Department of Agriculture. Recent tests have demonstrated that skim milk, frequently thrown away as a waste product, contains nearly all the food values of whole milk, despite that it is nine-tenths water. Two and a half quarts of skim milk, costing 10 cents, has about the same nutritive value as a pound of beefsteak costing 20 cents or more.

Whole milk, as every one knows, is an indispensable food for the young, and even in the diet of the adult it is comparatively economical. The only nutrient taken from it in skimming is the butter fat. There is left, therefore, in the skim milk, not only all of the sugar, which amounts to about four and one-half parts in every 100, and all of the mineral substances but also all of the protein.

The last named substance is important because, besides serving as a fuel for the body, as fats, sugars and starches do, it also supplies nitrogenous tissue building material. The proportion of protein in skim milk, as well as of the mineral constituents, which are also valuable for body building, is even greater than in whole milk.

Since the nutritive part of skim milk consists very largely of protein, it is to be classed, as whole milk is, with such food materials as eggs, meat, fish, poultry and cheese (though it is much more delicate than those foods) rather than with such substances as sugar, which serve only as fuel.

Two and a half quarts of skim milk contain almost as much protein and yield about the same amount of energy as a pound of beef. When skim milk sells for 4 cents a quart, or about 2 cents a pound, and round of beef for 20 cents a pound, a dime, or any other sum of money spent for skim milk will provide nearly twice as much nourishment as it will if spent for round steak. Round of beef, of course, is one of the lower priced meats and when compared with the more expensive cuts skim milk makes a still better showing from the standpoint of economy.

The comparison with oysters is very significant; a quart of oysters contains less than twice as much nourishment as a quart of skim milk and yet it often costs several times as much. Both are useful, wholesome foods, and in the oyster one has a special flavor. A combination of the two in oyster stew or creamed oysters is an economical way of using the oysters, since it makes a given quantity "go further."

Almanacks are in existence that were compiled in the fourteenth century, but they are only in manuscript; the first printed almanack was issued about the year 1475.

"Every one in our family is some kind of animal," said Jimmie to the amazed preacher. "Why, you should not say that!" the good man exclaimed. "Well," said Jimmie, "Mother's a dear, the baby is mother's little lamb, I'm the kid, and dad's the goat."

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PRACTICAL FARMING

Standardizing Canadian Eggs.

From present indications it would appear that one of the most important developments to date in the improvement of the Canadian egg trade was the action taken by the Canadian Produce Association last winter in adopting definite standards for Canadian eggs.

Hitherto each market and in most markets each dealer had a system of grading peculiar to his own trade. This resulted in endless confusion to the consumer, and great difficulty was experienced at times on the part of the producer in finding a satisfactory market for his product.

Realizing the importance of having definite standards for all live stock products the Live Stock Branch of the Dominion Department of Agriculture has endeavored by means of pamphlets, placards, and other means, to give the standards for eggs as much publicity as possible. The co-operation of exhibition association has also been secured, prominent among which has been that of the Canadian National Exhibition Association, at whose exhibition in Toronto this year, in response to prizes offered, probably the largest collection of eggs ever brought together in one exhibition of the American continent was displayed. Some 7,000 dozen in all were on exhibition. The prize list for eggs was prepared in accordance with the standards, and the judges made their awards according to the accuracy of the interpretation, on the part of the exhibitor, of the definitions of the various grades.

At a number of exhibitions where no extensive classes for eggs have been offered, the Live Stock Branch has made a display of eggs graded in accordance with the standards, and in each instance has supplemented the display with actual demonstrations in a candling booth specially designed for the purpose, of the way in which eggs of the various grades appear when candled.

In order that the consumers and producers generally may become more familiar with the various classes and grades, the following explanation is given:

Three general classes for eggs are provided under the standards, viz:—

"Fresh gathered," "Storage," and "Cracked and Dirties." Four grades are provided in the first class, three in the second, and two in the third.

The grades in the "Fresh Gathered" class are "Specials," "Extras," "No. 1's," and "No. 2's." The grade "Specials" is omitted from the "Storage" class, and both specials and extras from the class for "Cracked and Dirties."

"Specials," according to the standards are eggs of uniform size weighing over 24 ounces to the dozen or over 45 pounds net to the 30 dozen case; absolutely clean, strong and sound in shell; air cell small, not over 3/16 of an inch in depth; white of egg firm and clear, and yolk dimly visible; free from blood clots.

"Extras" are eggs of good size, weighing at least 24 ounces to the dozen or 45 pounds net to the 30 dozen case; clean, sound in shell; air cell less than ⅜ of an inch in depth; with white of egg firm, and yolk slightly visible.

"No. 1's" are eggs weighing at least 23 ounces to the dozen or 43 pounds net to the 30 dozen case; clean, sound in shell; air cell less than ½ inch in depth; white of egg reasonably firm; yolk visible but mobile, not stuck to the shell or seriously out of place.

"No. 2's" are eggs clean; sound in shell; may contain weak watery eggs, and eggs with heavy yolks, and all other eggs sound in shell and fit for food.

Consumers, in order to protect themselves in the matter of purchasing eggs, should acquaint themselves with these standards and the above definitions of the grades. Only by creating a demand for certain grades of eggs will the supply be forthcoming, and the demand can come only with a thorough knowledge on the part of the consumer as to what constitutes the various grades. It has also been frequently suggested that since the adoption of the standards consumers generally, in order to safeguard themselves, would do well to insist that all eggs as offered for sale be labelled in accordance with their proper grade.

Producers, too, would do well to more systematically grade their eggs before marketing, and, knowing definitely what they have in hand, thereby be in a better position to demand a price commensurate with the quality supplied.

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