

Good Luck

is thought to go a long way, but
Good Judgment goes farther.

TO USE

"SALADA"

IS GOOD JUDGMENT.

H343

"The Tea that is always Reliable."

On the Fringe of the Pampa

—BY EDWARD WOODWARD.

PART II.

The oncoming horse must have winded the stallion, for he swerved violently, nearly unseating his rider. With a gasp Thorp lowered his rifle. It was not Cortz who had followed him, but the girl—Megan Meredith! With a feeling of annoyance Thorp saw her flying black hair against the sky, and as he sprang to his feet she reined up beside him.

"Megan!" exclaimed Johnny Thorp, catching her by the arm as the horse shied at his sudden appearance. "What are you doing here?"

"Do in?" panted the girl, breathless from her rapid ride. "Do in! I've quit!"

"Quit!" Concern jolted the word from Thorp's lips. "Quit what?"

"The saloon," returned Megan calmly. "Borit would sure have killed me, after guessing I'd given you the tip 'bout the dope, and flinging the water bottle when he drew on you! Uncle don't stick at trifles like murder when he gets a real testy. He's just mad with a broken wrist; so I made tracks." Thorp cursed into the gloom.

"Where are you going?" he asked. Megan, the saloon girl, leaned forward in her saddle, and looked deep into the eyes of the onetime London clubman.

"That's for you to say, John Thorp," she said in a low voice. "I've friends at Endosa, north of Otron. If you'll take me there, I'll be safe!" She paused with a faint anxious smile on her lips. "If not," she added, "reckon I'll have to kick around your stamping ground for a while. You're the only man who's ever treated me like I was a Christian, and if you're going north, guess that's my direction as well!"

"Megan," he said. "Isn't there somewhere around here where you can find

shelter? It's a week's journey to Endosa; I'm traveling mighty light of stores, and sleeping rough."

Megan laughed shortly. "Guess where you sleep suits me!" she said. "I'll be a lot safer with you on the Pampa than anywhere around San Latois, with Gideon Cortz hanging about."

A vagrant thought slipping into his mind caused Thorp to speak suddenly and brusquely.

"Whose horse is this you're riding?" "Don't know," replied Megan. "It's the first I could grab. From the fork in his ear I guess he's one of Lloyd's troupe."

There was a sardonic note in Thorp's chuckle. How like a woman, he thought.

"So that if I take you along to Endosa," he said slowly, "I'll run the risk of being had for horsestealing as well as abduction! Either is a lynching job!"

Without a word she pulled her blue roan round, and set him in motion toward San Latois.

Johnny sprang after the girl. "Where are you off to now?" he queried.

"Guess I never thought of it the way you say," said Megan, a tremor in her voice, "I was just scared silly when I came away; but if it's going to bring you trouble, I'll go back and take what's coming to me!"

Something in the girl's tone softened Thorp's heart.

"Don't be a little fool, Megan!" he said. "I'll see you safe to Endosa."

The rule of Patagonia pampa traveling is a minimum of stores and a maximum of speed. Thorp, caught unprepared, certainly had the minimum of stores; but with this girl to look after, he guessed the speed would be slow.

For a couple of hours they pressed forward in silence. Johnny was vexed and concerned over his new responsibility.

They camped for the night in a valley sheltered from the wind, and here Johnny made a fire of scrub, and after brewing tea, and dividing some of his store of bread and meat, he unstrapped his sleeping bag, and spreading it out by the fire, indicated it to Megan, who sat watching him.

"You crawl into this, when you're ready," he said. "You'll need all the warmth you can get just before dawn."

Megan shook her head; and the light of the fire showed a hint of a smile hovering round her lips.

Thorp gave a motion of annoyance. "Don't be silly," he said brusquely. "You'll catch your death of cold if you don't; and you're less of a burden well than sick. I'll be well enough round that bluff with a horse blanket and my cloak."

The girl bit her lip at Thorp's candid words; and with a shrug of her shoulders let him go.

For long after he had wrapped himself in his rug and settled down to sleep, Thorp lay listening to the swish of the hobbles on the horses and thinking of the scrap of womanhood who, with the assurance of her limited knowledge and outlook, had intrusted herself to his care. His thoughts slipped back to another woman away in England, and with grim lips he stole himself against any softness creeping into his heart.

"If God made women, the devil gave them their brain and nature," was his embittered attitude; and he fell asleep cursing the caprice of the saloon girl who was taking him a hundred or more miles out of his course.

He was up and about again before dawn. Megan was still sleeping, and a twinge of compassion came to Thorp as he glanced at her beautiful pale face. Then he roused her.

"Hallo!" she said, opening her eyes wonderingly. "Is it time to move? I was just dreaming I was in—a—sort of heaven! Guess it's this sleeping bag!"

"Breakfast's ready," said Thorp, an unwilling smile forcing itself to his lips. For a second the girl lay still; a suggestion of question in her expression. Then she sprang to her feet, with a little fluttering sigh ending in a laugh.

She looked a wonderful vision at that moment. The lingering languor of sleep gave an added softness to her eyes; her lips, parted in a shy smile, showed a row of small white teeth; and as Thorp gazed at her, a sudden tense silence enshrouded them. It seemed as though he were about to say something, something of tremendous importance to them both; then

suddenly his eyes and lips hardened, and taking up his gun, he strode away.

That day they rode through a country of bald grass hills, hummocking on every side; blotched and pimply with scrub.

At midday they made a brief halt for food, and the meagreness of their stores appalled Johnny, as he made the division. If they wished to avoid the risk of starvation they must press forward with all haste, and so, after the scantiest period of rest, they continued their trek.

Megan got into her saddle with a groan; and as they rode forward Thorp noted that she was hard put to it to hide her fatigue; but he could think of no remedy for the discomfort, and it was not until toward evening that he realized the girl was "all in." He saw her sway in her saddle, and he knew that all hope of reaching their destination before their food supply petered out had vanished.

They bivouacked early that night; and Megan dropped from her horse like a stone as they halted. Thorp lifted her up gently and carrying her to the shelter of a bush. He lit a fire and with the tenderness of a woman, helped the aching girl into the sleeping-bag. Then rigging up a windshield with his cloak and horse cloth, he sat down to watch over her.

The warmth and merciful stillness lulled her to sleep; and as the man watched, he realized that this little daughter of the wild was breaking down the barricade he had erected against the wiles of her city-dwelling sisters.

Thorp had sat thus for an hour or so when glancing down he was surprised to see Megan's dark eyes open and fixed on him. There was an all-understanding look in her eyes; it was as though she had been reading his thoughts. With an effort he pulled himself together.

"Feel rested?" he asked.

Megan sighed.

"Yes," she said; and fell silent again. She still watched Thorp, and presently the man looked away; those dark, trustful eyes were unmeaning.

Suddenly Megan's voice broke the stillness.

"Have you ever been in love, John Thorp?" she asked.

Thorp's lips set hard in a bitter line and his nostrils twitched.

"Why do you ask?" he murmured.

"Because," whispered Megan, "I think you have; but they say you hate women. That's not true, is it?"

Thorp's eyes looked steadily into the girl's.

"Yes," he said. "That is quite true."

"But you have been in love," insisted Megan. "Tell me, what happened?"

With his eyes on the blackness of the surrounding night, he told her in brusque, bitter words, the story of his disillusionment and pain. How, when misfortune had overtaken him and he had lost his wealth, his young and beautiful wife had left him and their three-months-old daughter for the wealth of another man. How, disregarding his appeals, she refused to return. He told of the death of the child, the pain and horror of the divorce, and how he had come away to Patagonia with a heart of lead, to forget.

It was the first time Thorp had revealed his soul to a living creature; and the recital left him white and panting.

"That's what love has done for me," he finished. "Had my wife stood by me I could have pulled the rags of my possessions together, and made a new garment of prosperity and happiness! Now I'm alone on the fringe of the pampa."

For a space there was silence; then Megan's voice sounded.

"No one is happy alone, John Thorp!" she said.

With a sudden movement Thorp bent forward. Then he checked himself, and rising to his feet, walked away into the night.

During the next two days, travel on account of Megan's exhaustion was slow; and although they had long evenings by the campfire, the note of comradeship struck on the evening when Thorp had told of his past was not sounded again.

It became increasingly evident to Thorp that at the present slow progress starvation faced them. The food store was nearly done, and game was scarce in that region. He attempted to hoodwink Megan by pleading loss of appetite and not eating his share; but the girl watched him too closely to believe that story. She saw the hunger in his eyes; and once when Johnny had declared at midday that he was bang off his feed, Megan, without a word, walked to the pack and replaced her share of bread and meat.

"What have you done that for, Megan?" asked Thorp. "You must be hungry."

"John Thorp," she said, "guess I can starve just as well as you! I've watched you for these last two days, and you've not eaten a boy's share."

Thorp laughed harshly.

"Why should I do that if I were hungry?" he asked.

"Because you're a man," replied Megan. "Because you're a gentleman! You've just got to rearrange your ideas about women, John Thorp!"

There are things they can do you think they can't; and there are things they can't do you think they can. They can love truly and forever; but they can't eat when the man they are with goes empty!"

He felt his limbs tremble, and his heart thud and hurry in his breast. Could he be the man?

"Megan!" he said. "Megan—! Tremor of lip pinched his voice to silence; and there was the love of all women in Megan's eyes as she raised her hands to his shoulders.

"Johnny!" she said. "You're a fool! A brave fool, but a blind one! Because one woman double-crossed you, you think the whole world's wrong. The pampa can't give you comfort; only a woman can do that!"

Still Thorp remained blind, and his arms hung limp at his sides. "I have nothing to offer a woman now," he said.

"No man with health and strength and an honest heart can say that, Johnny—Johnny!"

Suddenly Megan's use of the affectionate form of his name came to Thorp's realization, and in a second his arms were round the girl.

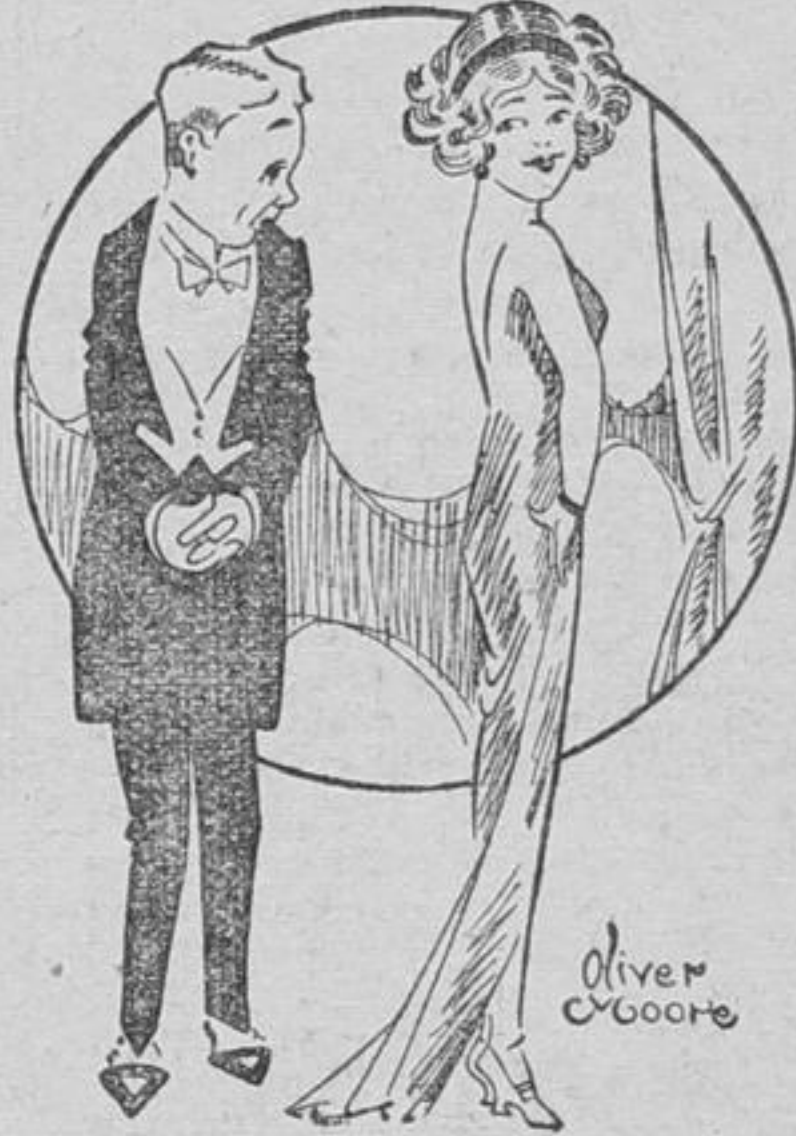
"My darling," he said, his voice hard and strained. "Megan, my dear, I love you!"

Megan Meredith raised her face to his.

"I know, Johnny," she said flushing. "I have known ever since that first morning when, after staring at me, you suddenly went away with your gun to look for game that wasn't there. I guessed it long before that, when you used to come into the saloon, but I didn't know it for certain till then."

Thorp's lips met hers and hunger was forgotten.

They were married a week later at Endosa; and John Thorp's dead past is buried on the fringe of the pampa. (The End.)



Not Complimented.

He (exaltedly)—"I feel I could put all the world under your feet!"

She—"Sir, permit me to say the size of my feet would not permit the carrying out of your ambition by any means."

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ISSUE NO. 23—23.

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