

Chambers Robert William

# The Flaming Jewel



Robert Chambers

**The Flaming Jewel**

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# Chambers Robert W. Robert William The Flaming Jewel

To R. T

## I

Three Guests at dinner! That's the life! —  
Wedgewood, Revere, and Duncan Phyfe!

## II

You sit on Duncan – when you dare, —  
And out of Wedgewood, using care,  
With Paul Revere you eat your fare.

## III

From Paul you borrow fork and knife  
To wage a gastronomic strife  
In porringers; and platters rare  
Of blue Historic Willow-ware.

## IV

Banquets with cymbal, drum and fife,  
Or rose-wreathed feasts with riot rife  
To your chaste suppers can't compare.

## V

Let those deny the truth who dare! —  
Paul, Duncan, Wedgewood! That's the life!  
All else is bunk and empty air.

## ENVOI

The Cordon-bleu has set the pace  
With Goulash, Haggis, Bouillabaisse,  
Curry, Chop-suey, Kous-Kous Stew —  
I can not offer these to you, —  
Being a plain, old-fashioned cook, —  
So pray accept this scrambled book.

*R. W. C.*

## Episode One

### EVE

#### I

DURING the last two years Fate, Chance, and Destiny had been too busy to attend to Mike Clinch.

But now his turn was coming in the Eternal Sequence of things. The stars in their courses indicated the beginning of the undoing of Mike Clinch.

From Esthonia a refugee Countess wrote to James Darragh in New York:

" – After two years we have discovered that it was José Quintana's band of international thieves that robbed Ricca. Quintana has disappeared.

"A Levantine diamond broker in New York, named Emanuel Sard, may be in communication with him.

"Ricca and I are going to America as soon as possible.

*"Valentine."*

The day Darragh received the letter he started to look up Sard.

But that very morning Sard had received a curious letter from Rotterdam. This was the letter:

"Sardius – Tourmaline – Aragonite – Rhodonite \* Porphyry – Obsidian – Nugget Gold – Diaspore \* Novaculite \* Yu \* Nugget Silver – Amber – Matrix Turquoise – Elaeolite \* Ivory – Sardonyx \* Moonstone – Iceland Spar – Kalpa Zircon – Eye Agate \* Celonite – Lapis – Iolite – Nephrite – Chalcedony – Hydrolite \* Hegolite – Amethyst – Selenite \* Fire Opal – Labradorite – Aquamarine – Malachite – Iris Stone – Natrolite – Garnet \* Jade – Emerald – Wood Opal – Essonite – Lazuli \* Epidote – Ruby – Onyx – Sapphire – Indicolite – Topaz – Euclase \* Indian Diamond \* Star Sapphire – African Diamond – Iceland Spar – Lapis Crucifer \* Abalone – Turkish Turquoise \* Old Mine Stone – Natrolite – Cats Eye – Electrum \* \* \*  $\frac{1}{5}$  ā ā."

That afternoon young Darragh located Sard's office and presented himself as a customer. The weasel-faced clerk behind the wicket laid a pistol handy and informed Darragh that Sard was away on a business trip.

Darragh looked cautiously around the small office:

"Can anybody hear us?"

"Nobody. Why?"

"I have important news concerning José Quintana," whispered Darragh; "Where is Sard?"

"Why, he had a letter from Quintana this very morning," replied the clerk in a low, uneasy voice. "Mr. Sard left for Albany on the one o'clock train. Is there any trouble?"

"Plenty," replied Darragh coolly; "do you know Quintana?"

"No. But Mr. Sard expects him here any day now."

Darragh leaned closer against the grille: "Listen very carefully; if a man comes here who calls himself José Quintana, turn him over to the police until Mr. Sard returns. No matter what he tells you, turn him over to the police. Do you understand?"

"Who are you?" demanded the worried clerk. "Are you one of Quintana's people?"

"Young man," said Darragh, "I'm close enough to Quintana to give *you* orders. And give Sard orders... And Quintana, too!"

A great light dawned on the scared clerk:

"*You* are José Quintana!" he said hoarsely.

Darragh bored him through with his dark stare:

"Mind your business," he said.

That night in Albany Darragh picked up Sard's trail. It led to a dealer in automobiles. Sard had bought a Comet Six, paying cash, and had started north.

Through Schenectady, Fonda, and Mayfield, the following day, Darragh traced a brand new Comet Six containing one short, dark Levantine with a parrot nose. In Northville Darragh hired a Ford.

At Lake Pleasant Sard's car went wrong. Darragh missed him by ten minutes; but he learned that Sard had inquired the way to Ghost Lake Inn.

That was sufficient. Darragh bought an axe, drove as far as Harrod's Corners, dismissed the Ford, and walked into a forest entirely familiar to him.

He emerged in half an hour on a wood road two miles farther on. Here he felled a tree across the road and sat down in the bushes to await events.

Toward sunset, hearing a car coming, he tied his handkerchief over his face below the eyes, and took an automatic from his pocket.

Sard's car stopped and Sard got out to inspect the obstruction. Darragh sauntered out of the bushes, poked his pistol against Mr. Sard's fat abdomen, and leisurely and thoroughly robbed him.

In an agreeable spot near a brook Darragh lighted his pipe and sat him down to examine the booty in detail. Two pistols, a stiletto, and a blackjack composed the arsenal of Mr. Sard. A large wallet disclosed more than four thousand dollars in Treasury notes – something to reimburse Ricca when she arrived, he thought.

Among Sard's papers he discovered a cipher letter from Rotterdam – probably from Quintana. Cipher was rather in Darragh's line. All ciphers are solved by similar methods, unless the key is contained in a code book known only to sender and receiver.

But Quintana's cipher proved to be only an easy acrostic – the very simplest of secret messages. Within an hour Darragh had it pencilled out:

### Cipher

"Take notice:

"Star Pond, N. Y... Name is Mike Clinch... Has Flaming Jewel... Erosite...

I sail at once.

"*Quintana.*"

Having served in Russia as an officer in the Military Intelligence Department attached to the American Expeditionary Forces, Darragh had little trouble with Quintana's letter. Even the signature was not difficult, the fraction  $\frac{1}{5}$  was easily translated *Quint*; and the familiar prescription symbol ā ā spelled *ana*; which gave Quintana's name in full.

He had heard of Erosite as the rarest and most magnificent of all gems. Only three were known. The young Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia had possessed one.

Darragh was immensely amused to find that the chase after Emanuel Sard should have led him to the very borders of the great Harrod estate in the Adirondacks.

He gathered up his loot and walked on through the splendid forest which once had belonged to Henry Harrod of Boston, and which now was the property of Harrod's nephew, James Darragh.

When he came to the first trespass notice he stood a moment to read it. Then, slowly, he turned and looked toward Clinch's. An autumn sunset flared like a conflagration through the pines. There was a glimmer of water, too, where Star Pond lay.

Fate, Chance, and Destiny were becoming very busy with Mike Clinch. They had started Quintana, Sard, and Darragh on his trail. Now they stirred up the sovereign State of New York.

That lank wolf, Justice, was afoot and sniffing uncomfortably close to the heels of Mike Clinch.

## II

Two State Troopers drew bridles in the yellowing October forest. Their smart drab uniforms touched with purple blended harmoniously with the autumn woods. They were as inconspicuous as two deer in the dappled shadow. There was a sunny clearing just ahead. The wood road they had been travelling entered it. Beyond lay Star Pond.

Trooper Lannis said to Trooper Stormont: "That's Mike Clinch's clearing. Our man may be there. Now we'll see if anybody tips him off this time."

Forest and clearing were very still in the sunshine. Nothing stirred save gold leaves drifting down, and a hawk high in the deep blue sky turning in narrow circles.

Lannis was instructing Stormont, who had been transferred from the Long Island Troop, and who was unacquainted with local matters.

Lannis said: "Clinch's dump stands on the other edge of the clearing. Clinch owns five hundred acres in here. He's a rat."

"Bad?"

"Well, he's mean. I don't know how bad he is. But he runs a rotten dump. The forest has its slums as well as the city. This is the Hell's Kitchen of the North Woods."

Stormont nodded.

"All the scum of the wilderness gathers here," went on Lannis. "Here's where half the trouble in the North Woods hatches. We'll eat dinner at Clinch's. His stepdaughter is a peach."

The sturdy, sun-browned trooper glanced at his wrist watch, stretched his legs in his stirrups.

"Jack," he said, "I want you to get Clinch right, and I'm going to tell you about his outfit while we watch this road. It's like a movie. Clinch plays the lead. I'll dope out the scenario for you –"

He turned sideways in his saddle, freeing both spurred heels and lolled so, constructing a cigarette while he talked:

"Way back around 1900 Mike Clinch was a guide – a decent young fellow they say. He guided fishing parties in summer, hunters in fall and winter. He made money and built the house. The people he guided were wealthy. He made a lot of money and bought land. I understand he was square and that everybody liked him.

"About that time there came to Clinch's 'hotel' a Mr. and Mrs. Strayer. They were 'lungers.' Strayer seemed to be a gentleman; his wife was good looking and rather common. Both were very young. He had the consump bad – the galloping variety. He didn't last long. A month after he died his young wife had a baby. Clinch married her. She also died the same year. The baby's name was Eve. Clinch became quite crazy about her and started to make a lady of her. That was his mania."

Lannis leaned from his saddle and carefully dropped his cigarette end into a puddle of rain water. Then he swung one leg over and sat side saddle.

"Clinch had plenty of money in those days," he went on. "He could afford to educate the child. The kid had a governess. Then he sent her to a fancy boarding school. She had everything a young girl could want.

"She developed into a pretty young thing at fifteen... She's eighteen now – and I don't know what to call her. She pulled a gun on me in July."

"What!"

"Sure. There was a row at Clinch's dump. A rum-runner called Jake Klooon got shot up. I came up to get Clinch. He was sick-drunk in his bunk. When I broke in the door Eve Strayer pulled a gun on me."

"What happened?" inquired Stormont.

"Nothing. I took Clinch... But he got off as usual."

"Acquitted?"

Lannis nodded, rolling another cigarette:

"Now, I'll tell you how Clinch happened to go wrong," he said. "You see he'd always made his living by guiding. Well, some years ago Henry Harrod, of Boston, came here and bought thousands and thousands of acres of forest all around Clinch's – " Lannis half rose on one stirrup and, with a comprehensive sweep of his muscular arm, ending in a flourish: " – He bought everything for miles and miles. And that started Clinch down hill. Harrod tried to force Clinch to sell. The millionaire tactics you know. He was determined to oust him. Clinch got mad and wouldn't sell at any price. Harrod kept on buying all around Clinch and posted trespass notices. That meant ruin to Clinch. He was walled in. No hunters care to be restricted. Clinch's little property was no good. Business stopped. His stepdaughter's education became expensive. He was in a bad way. Harrod offered him a big price. But Clinch turned ugly and wouldn't budge. And that's how Clinch began to go wrong."

"Poor devil," said Stormont.

"Devil, all right. Poor, too. But he needed money. He was crazy to make a lady of Eve Strayer. And there are ways of finding money, you know."

Stormont nodded.

"Well, Clinch found money in those ways. The Conservation Commissioner in Albany began to hear about game law violations. The Revenue people heard of rum-running. Clinch lost his guide's license. But nobody could get the goods on him.

"There was a rough backwoods bunch always drifting about Clinch's place in those days. There were fights. And not so many miles from Clinch's there was highway robbery and a murder or two.

"Then the war came. The draft caught Clinch. Malone exempted him, he being the sole support of his stepchild.

"But the girl volunteered. She got to France, somehow – scrubbed in a hospital, I believe – anyway, Clinch wanted to be on the same side of the world she was on, and he went with a Forestry Regiment and cut trees for railroad ties in southern France until the war ended and they sent him home.

"Eve Strayer came back too. She's there now. You'll see her at dinner time. She sticks to Clinch. He's a rat. He's up against the dry laws and the game laws. Government enforcement agents, game protectors, State Constabulary, all keep an eye on Clinch. Harrod's trespass signs fence him in. He's like a rat in a trap. Yet Clinch makes money at law breaking and nobody can catch him red-handed.

"He kills Harrod's deer. That's certain. I mean Harrod's nephew's deer. Harrod's dead. Darragh's the young nephew's name. He's never been here – he was in the army – in Russia – I don't know what became of him – but he keeps up the Harrod preserve – game-wardens, patrols, watchers, trespass signs and all."

Lannis finished his second cigarette, got back into his stirrups and, gathering bridle, began leisurely to divide curb and snaffle.

"That's the layout, Jack," he said. "Yonder lies the Red Light district of the North Woods. Mike Clinch is the brains of all the dirty work that goes on. A floating population of crooks and bums – game violators, boot-leggers, market hunters, pelt 'collectors,' rum-runners, hootch makers, do his dirty work – and I guess there are some who'll stick you up by starlight for a quarter and others who'll knock your block off for a dollar... And there's the girl, Eve Strayer. I don't get her at all, except that she's loyal to Clinch... And now you know what you ought to know about this movie called 'Hell in

the Woods.' And it's up to us to keep a calm, impartial eye on the picture and try to follow the plot they're acting out – if there is any."

Stormont said: "Thanks, Bill; I'm posted... And I'm getting hungry, too."

"I believe," said Lannis, "that you want to see that girl."

"I do," returned the other, laughing.

"Well, you'll see her. She's good to look at. But I don't get her at all."

"Why?"

"Because she *looks* right and yet she lives at Clinch's with him and his bunch of bums. Would you think a straight girl could stand it?"

"No man can tell what a straight girl can stand."

"Straight or crooked she stands for Mike Clinch," said Lannis, "and he's a ratty customer."

"Maybe the girl is fond of him. It's natural."

"I guess it's that. But I don't see how any young girl can stomach the life at Clinch's."

"It's a wonder what a decent woman will stand," observed Stormont. "Ninety-nine per cent. of all wives ought to receive the D. S. O."

"Do you think we're so rotten?" inquired Lannis, smiling.

"Not so rotten. No. But any man knows what men are. And it's a wonder women stick to us when they learn."

They laughed. Lannis glanced at his watch again.

"Well," he said, "I don't believe anybody has tipped off our man. It's noon. Come on to dinner, Jack."

They cantered forward into the sunlit clearing. Star Pond lay ahead. On its edge stood Clinch's.

### III

Clinch, in his shirt sleeves, came out on the veranda. He had little light grey eyes, close-clipped grey hair, and was clean shaven.

"How are you, Clinch," inquired Lannis affably.

"All right," replied Clinch; "you're the same, I hope."

"Trooper Stormont, Mr. Clinch," said Lannis in his genial way.

"Pleased to know you," said Clinch, level-eyed, unstirring.

The troopers dismounted. Both shook hands with Clinch. Then Lannis led the way to the barn.

"We'll eat well," he remarked to his comrade. "Clinch cooks."

From the care of their horses they went to a pump to wash. One or two rough looking men slouched out of the house and glanced at them.

"Hallo, Jake," said Lannis cheerily.

Jake Kloon grunted acknowledgment.

Lannis said in Stormont's ear: "Here she comes with towels. She's pretty, isn't she?"

A young girl in pink gingham advanced toward them across the patch of grass.

Lannis was very polite and presented Stormont. The girl handed them two rough towels, glanced at Stormont again after the introduction, smiled slightly.

"Dinner is ready," she said.

They dried their faces and followed her back to the house.

It was an unpainted building, partly of log. In the dining room half a dozen men waited silently for food. Lannis saluted all, named his comrade, and seated himself.

A delicious odour of johnny-cake pervaded the room. Presently Eve Strayer appeared with the dinner.

There was dew on her pale forehead – the heat of the kitchen, no doubt. The girl's thick, lustrous hair was brownish gold, and so twisted up that it revealed her ears and a very white neck.

When she brought Stormont his dinner he caught her eyes a moment – experienced a slight shock of pleasure at their intense blue – the gentian-blue of the summer zenith at midday.

Lannis remained affable, even became jocose at moments:

"No hootch for dinner, Mike? How's that, now?"

"The Boot-leg Express is a day late," replied Clinch, with cold humour.

Around the table ran an odd sound – a company of catamounts feeding might have made such a noise – if catamounts ever laugh.

"How's the fur market, Jake?" inquired Lannis, pouring gravy over his mashed potato.

Kloon quoted prices with an oath.

A mean-visaged young man named Leverett complained of the price of traps.

"What do you care?" inquired Lannis genially. "The other man pays. What are you kicking about, anyway? It wasn't so long ago that muskrats were ten cents."

The trooper's good-humoured intimation that Earl Leverett took fur in other men's traps was not lost on the company. Leverett's fox visage reddened; Jake Kloon, who had only one eye, glared at the State Trooper but said nothing.

Clinch's pale gaze met the trooper's smiling one: "The jays and squirrels talk too," he said slowly. "It don't mean anything. Only the show-down counts."

"You're quite right, Clinch. The show-down is what we pay to see. But talk is the tune the orchestra plays before the curtain rises."

Stormont had finished dinner. He heard a low, charming voice from behind his chair:

"Apple pie, lemon pie, maple cake, berry roll."

He looked up into two gentian-blue eyes.

"Lemon pie, please," he said, blushing.

When dinner was over and the bare little dining room empty except for Clinch and the two State Troopers, the former folded his heavy, powerful hands on the table's edge and turned his square face and pale-eyed gaze on Lannis.

"Spit it out," he said in a passionless voice.

Lannis crossed one knee over the other, lighted a cigarette:

"Is there a young fellow working for you named Hal Smith?"

"No," said Clinch.

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Clinch," continued Lannis, "have you heard about a stick-up on the wood-road out of Ghost Lake?"

"No."

"Well, a wealthy tourist from New York – a Mr. Sard, stopping at Ghost Lake Inn – was held up and robbed last Saturday toward sundown."

"Never heard of him," said Clinch, calmly.

"The robber took four thousand dollars in bills and some private papers from him."

"It's no skin off my shins," remarked Clinch.

"He's laid a complaint."

"Yes?"

"Have any strangers been here since Saturday evening?"

"No."

There was a pause.

"We heard you had a new man named Hal Smith working around your place."

"No."

"He came here Saturday night."

"Who says so?"

"A guide from Ghost Lake."

"He's a liar."

"You know," said Lannis, "it won't do you any good if hold-up men can hide here and make a getaway."

"G'wan and search," said Clinch, calmly.

They searched the "hotel" from garret to cellar. They searched the barn, boat-shed, out-houses. While this was going on, Clinch went into the kitchen.

"Eve," he said coolly, "the State Troopers are after that fellow, Hal Smith, who came here Saturday night. Where is he?"

"He went into Harrod's to get us a deer," she replied in a low voice. "What has he done?"

"Stuck up a man on the Ghost Lake road. He ought to have told me. Do you think you could meet up with him and tip him off?"

"He's hunting on Owl Marsh. I'll try."

"All right. Change your clothes and slip out the back door. And look out for Harrod's patrols, too."

"All right, dad," she said. "If I have to be out to-night, don't worry. I'll get word to Smith somehow."

Half an hour later Lannis and Stormont returned from a prowl around the clearing. Lannis paid the reckoning; his comrade led out the horses. He said again to Lannis:

"I'm sure it was the girl. She wore men's clothes and she went into the woods on a run."

As they started to ride away, Lannis said to Clinch, who stood on the veranda:

"It's still blue-jay and squirrel talk between us, Mike, but the show-down is sure to come. Better go straight while the going's good."

"I go straight enough to suit me," said Clinch.

"But it's the Government that is to be suited, Mike. And if it gets you right you'll be in dutch."

"Don't let that worry you," said Clinch.

About three o'clock the two State Troopers, riding at a walk, came to the forks of the Ghost Lake road.

"Now," said Lannis to Stormont, "if you really believe you saw the girl beat it out of the back door and take to the woods, she's probably somewhere in there – " he pointed into the western forest. "But," he added, "what's your idea in following her?"

"She wore men's clothes; she was in a hurry and trying to keep out of sight. I wondered whether Clinch might have sent her to warn this hold-up fellow."

"That's rather a long shot, isn't it?"

"Very long. I could go in and look about a bit, if you'll lead my horse."

"All right. Take your bearings. This road runs west to Ghost Lake. We sleep at the Inn there – if you mean to cross the woods on foot."

Stormont nodded, consulted his map and compass, pocketed both, unbuckled his spurs.

When he was ready he gave his bridle to Lannis.

"I'd just like to see what she's up to," he remarked.

"All right. If you miss me come to the Inn," said Lannis, starting on with the led horse.

The forest was open amid a big stand of white pine and hemlock, and Stormont travelled easily and swiftly. He had struck a line by compass that must cross the direction taken by Eve Strayer when she left Clinch's. But it was a wild chance that he would ever run across her.

And probably he never would have if the man that she was looking for had not fired a shot on the edge of that vast maze of stream, morass and dead timber called Owl Marsh.

Far away in the open forest Stormont heard the shot and turned in that direction.

But Eve already was very near when the young man who called himself Hal Smith fired at one of Harrod's deer – a three-prong buck on the edge of the dead water.

Smith had drawn and dressed the buck by the time the girl found him.

He was cleaning up when she arrived, squatting by the water's edge when he heard her voice across the swale:

"Smith! The State Troopers are looking for you!"

He stood up, dried his hands on his breeches. The girl picked her way across the bog, jumping from one tussock to the next.

When she told him what had happened he began to laugh.

"Did you really stick up this man?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm afraid I did, Eve," he replied, still laughing.

The girl's entire expression altered.

"So that's the sort you are," she said. "I thought you different. But you're all a rotten lot – "

"Hold on," he interrupted, "what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that the only men who ever come to Star Pond are crooks," she retorted bitterly. "I didn't believe you were. You look decent. But you're as crooked as the rest of them – and it seems as if I – I couldn't stand it – any longer – "

"If you think me so rotten, why did you run all the way from Clinch's to warn me?" he asked curiously.

"I didn't do it for *you*; I did it for my father. They'll jail him if they catch him hiding you. They've got it in for him. If they put him in prison he'll die. He couldn't stand it. I *know*. And that's why I came to find you and tell you to clear out – "

The distant crack of a dry stick checked her. The next instant she picked up his rifle, seized his arm, and fairly dragged him into a spruce thicket.

"Do you want to get my father into trouble!" she said fiercely.

The rocky flank of Star Peak bordered the marsh here.

"Come on," she whispered, jerking him along through the thicket and up the rocks to a cleft – a hole in the sheer rock overhung by shaggy hemlock.

"Get in there," she said breathlessly.

"Whoever comes," he protested, "will see the buck yonder, and will certainly look in here – "

"Not if I go down there and take your medicine. Creep into that cave and lie down."

"What do you intend to do?" he demanded, interested and amused.

"If it's one of Harrod's game-keepers," said the girl drily, "it only means a summons and a fine for me. And if it's a State Trooper, who is prowling in the woods yonder hunting crooks, he'll find nobody here but a trespasser. Keep quiet. I'll stand him off."

## IV

When State Trooper Stormont came out on the edge of Owl Marsh, the girl was kneeling by the water, washing deer blood from her slender, sun-tanned fingers.

"What are you doing here?" she enquired, looking up over her shoulder with a slight smile.

"Just having a look around," he said pleasantly. "That's a nice fat buck you have there."

"Yes, he's nice."

"You shot him?" asked Stormont.

"Who else do you suppose shot him?" she enquired, smilingly. She rinsed her fingers again and stood up, swinging her arms to dry her hands, – a lithe, grey-shirted figure in her boyish garments, straight, supple, and strong.

"I saw you hurrying into the woods," said Stormont.

"Yes, I was in a hurry. We need meat."

"I didn't notice that you carried a rifle when I saw you leave the house – by the back door."

"No; it was in the woods," she said indifferently.

"You have a hiding place for your rifle?"

"For other things, also," she said, letting her eyes of gentian-blue rest on the young man.

"You seem to be very secretive."

"Is a girl more so than a man?" she asked smilingly.

Stormont smiled too, then became grave.

"Who else was here with you?" he asked quietly.

She seemed surprised. "Did you see anybody else?"

He hesitated, flushed, pointed down at the wet sphagnum. Smith's foot-prints were there in damning contrast to her own. Worse than that, Smith's pipe lay on an embedded log, and a rubber tobacco pouch beside it.

She said with a slight catch in her breath: "It seems that somebody has been here... Some hunter, perhaps, – or a game warden..."

"Or Hal Smith," said Stormont.

A painful colour swept the girl's face and throat. The man, sorry for her, looked away.

After a silence: "I know something about you," he said gently. "And now that I've seen you – heard you speak – met your eyes – I know enough about you to form an opinion... So I don't ask you to turn informer. But the law won't stand for what Clinch is doing – whatever provocation he has had. And he must not aid or abet any criminal, or harbour any malefactor."

The girl's features were expressionless. The passive, sullen beauty of her troubled the trooper.

"Trouble for Clinch means sorrow for you," he said. "I don't want you to be unhappy. I bear Clinch no ill will. For this reason I ask him, and I ask you too, to stand clear of this affair."

"Hal Smith is wanted. I'm here to take him."

As she said nothing, he looked down at the foot-print in the sphagnum. Then his eyes moved to the next imprint; to the next. Then he moved slowly along the water's edge, tracking the course of the man he was following.

The girl watched him in silence until the plain trail led him to the spruce thicket.

"Don't go in there!" she said sharply, with an odd tremor in her voice.

He turned and looked at her, then stepped calmly into the thicket. And the next instant she was among the spruces, too, confronting him with her rifle.

"Get out of these woods!" she said.

He looked into the girl's deathly white face.

"Eve," he said, "it will go hard with you if you kill me. I don't want you to live out your life in prison."

"I can't help it. If you send my father to prison he'll die. I'd rather die myself. Let us alone, I tell you! The man you're after is nothing to us. We didn't know he had stuck up anybody!"

"If he's nothing to you, why do you point that rifle at me?"

"I tell you he is nothing to us. But my father wouldn't betray a dog. And I won't. That's all. Now get out of these woods and come back to-morrow. Nobody'll interfere with you then."

Stormont smiled: "Eve," he said, "do you really think me as yellow as that?"

Her blue eyes flashed a terrible warning, but, in the same instant, he had caught her rifle, twisting it out of her grasp as it exploded.

The detonation dazed her; then, as he flung the rifle into the water, she caught him by neck and belt and flung him bodily into the spruces.

But she fell with him; he held her twisting and struggling with all her superb and supple strength; staggered to his feet, still mastering her; and, as she struggled, sobbing, locked hot and panting in his arms, he snapped a pair of handcuffs on her wrists and flung her aside.

She fell on both knees, got up, shoulder deep in spruce, blood running from her lip over her chin.

The trooper took her by the arm. She was trembling all over. He took a thin steel chain and padlock from his pocket, passed the links around her steel-bound wrists, and fastened her to a young birch tree.

Then, drawing his pistol from its holster, he went swiftly forward through the spruces.

When he saw the cleft in the rocky flank of Star Peak, he walked straight to the black hole which confronted him.

"Come out of there," he said distinctly.

After a few seconds Smith came out.

"Good God!" said Stormont in a low voice. "What are you doing here, Darragh?"

Darragh came close and rested one hand on Stormont's shoulder:

"Don't crab my game, Stormont. I never dreamed you were in the Constabulary or I'd have let you know."

"Are *you* Hal Smith?"

"I sure am. Where's that girl?"

"Handcuffed out yonder."

"Then for God's sake go back and act as if you hadn't found me. Tell Mayor Chandler that I'm after bigger game than he is."

"Clinch?"

"Stormont, I'm here to *protect* Mike Clinch. Tell the Mayor not to touch him. The men I'm after are going to try to rob him. I don't want them to because – well, I'm going to rob him myself."

Stormont stared.

"You must stand by me," said Darragh. "So must the Mayor. He knows me through and through. Tell him to forget that hold-up. I stopped that man Sard. I frisked him. Tell the Mayor. I'll keep in touch with him."

"Of course," said Stormont, "that settles it."

"Thanks, old chap. Now go back to that girl and let her believe that you never found me."

A slight smile touched their eyes. Both instinctively saluted. Then they shook hands; Darragh, alias Hal Smith, went back into the hemlock-shaded hole in the rocks; Trooper Stormont walked slowly down through the spruces.

When Eve saw him returning empty handed, something flashed in her pallid face like sunlight across snow.

Stormont passed her, went to the water's edge, soaked a spicy handful of sphagnum moss in the icy water, came back and wiped the blood from her face.

The girl seemed astounded; her face surged in vivid colour as he unlocked the handcuffs and pocketed them and the little steel chain.

Her lip was bleeding again. He washed it with wet moss, took a clean handkerchief from the breast of his tunic and laid it against her mouth.

"Hold it there," he said.

Mechanically she raised her hand to support the compress. Stormont went back to the shore, recovered her rifle from the shallow water, and returned with it.

As she made no motion to take it, he stood it against the tree to which he had tied her.

Then he came close to her where she stood holding his handkerchief against her mouth and looking at him out of steady eyes as deeply blue as gentian blossoms.

"Eve," he said, "you win. But you won't forgive me... I wish we could be friends, some day... We never can, now... Good-bye."

Neither spoke again. Then, of a sudden, the girl's eyes filled; and Trooper Stormont caught her free hand and kissed it; – kissed it again and again, – dropped it and went striding away through the underbrush which was now all rosy with the rays of sunset.

After he had disappeared, the girl, Eve, went to the cleft in the rocks above.

"Come out," she said contemptuously. "It's a good thing you hid, because there was a real man after you; and God help you if he ever finds you!"

Hal Smith came out.

"Pack in your meat," said the girl curtly, and flung his rifle across her shoulder.

Through the ruddy afterglow she led the way homeward, a man's handkerchief pressed to her wounded mouth, her eyes preoccupied with the strangest thoughts that ever had stirred her virgin mind.

Behind her walked Darragh with his load of venison and his alias, – and his tongue in his cheek.

Thus began the preliminaries toward the ultimate undoing of Mike Clinch. Fate, Chance, and Destiny had undertaken the job in earnest.

## Episode Two

# THE RULING PASSION

### I

NOBODY understood how José Quintana had slipped through the Secret Service net spread for him at every port.

The United States authorities did not know why Quintana had come to America. They realised merely that he arrived for no good purpose; and they had meant to arrest and hold him for extradition if requested; for deportation as an undesirable alien anyway.

Only two men in America knew that Quintana had come to the United States for the purpose of recovering the famous "Flaming Jewel," stolen by him from the Grand Duchess Theodorica of Esthonia; and stolen from Quintana, in turn, by a private soldier in an American Forestry Regiment, on leave in Paris. This soldier's name, probably, was Michael Clinch.

One of the men who knew why Quintana might come to America was James Darragh, recently of the Military Intelligence, but now passing as a hold-up man under the name of Hal Smith, and actually in the employment of Clinch at his disreputable "hotel" at Star Pond in the North Woods.

The other man who knew why Quintana had come to America was Emanuel Sard, a Levantine diamond broker of New York, Quintana's agent in America.

Now, as the October days passed without any report of Quintana's detention, Darragh, known as Hal Smith at Clinch's dump, began to suspect that Quintana had already slid into America through the meshes of the police.

If so, this desperate international criminal could be expected at Clinch's under some guise or other, piloted thither by Emanuel Sard.

So Hal Smith, whose duty was to wash dishes, do chores, and also to supply Clinch's with "mountain beef" – or deer taken illegally – made it convenient to prowl every day in the vicinity of the Ghost Lake road.

He was perfectly familiar with Emanuel Sard's squat features and parrot nose, having robbed Mr. Sard of Quintana's cipher and of \$4,000 at pistol point. And one morning, while roving around the guide's quarters at Ghost Lake Inn, Smith beheld Sard himself on the hotel veranda, in company with five strangers of foreign aspect.

During the midday dinner Smith, on pretense of enquiring for a guide's license, got a look at the Inn ledger. Sard's signature was on it, followed by the names of Henri Picquet, Nicolas Salzar, Victor Georgiades, Harry Beck, and José Sanchez. And Smith went back through the wilderness to Star Pond, convinced that one of these gentlemen was Quintana, and the remainder, Quintana's gang; and that they were here to do murder if necessary in their remorseless quest of "The Flaming Jewel." Two million dollars once had been offered for the Flaming Jewel; and had been refused.

Clinch probably possessed it. Smith was now convinced of that. But he was there to rob Clinch of it himself. For he had promised the little Grand Duchess to help recover her Erosite jewel; and now that he had finally traced its probable possession to Clinch, he was wondering how this recovery was to be accomplished.

To arrest Clinch meant ruin to Eve Strayer. Besides he knew now that Clinch would die in prison before revealing the hiding place of the Flaming Jewel.

Also, how could it be proven that Clinch had the Erosite gem? The cipher from Quintana was not sufficient evidence.

No; the only way was to watch Clinch, prevent any robbery by Quintana's gang, somehow discover where the Flaming Jewel had been concealed, take it, and restore it to the beggared young girl whose only financial resource now lay in the possible recovery of this almost priceless gem.

Toward evening Hal Smith shot two deer near Owl Marsh. To poach on his own property appealed to his sense of humour. And Clinch, never dreaming that Hal Smith was the James Darragh who had inherited Harrod's vast preserve, damned all millionaires for every buck brought in, and became friendlier to Smith.

## II

Clinch's dump was the disposal plant in which collected the human sewage of the wilderness.

It being Saturday, the scum of the North Woods was gathering at the Star Pond resort. A venison and chicken supper was promised – and a dance if any women appeared.

Jake Kloon had run in some Canadian hooch; Darragh, alias Hal Smith, contributed two fat deer and Clinch cooked them. By ten o'clock that morning many of the men were growing noisy; some were already drunk by noon. Shortly after midday dinner the first fight started – extinguished only after Clinch had beaten several of the backwoods aristocracy insensible.

Towering amid the wreck of battle, his light grey eyes a-glitter, Clinch dominated, swinging his iron fists.

When the combat ended and the fallen lay starkly where they fell, Clinch said in his pleasant, level voice:

"Take them out and stick their heads in the pond. And don't go for to get me mad, boys, or I'm liable to act up rough."

They bore forth the sleepers for immersion in Star Pond. Clinch relighted his cigar and repeated the rulings which had caused the fracas:

"You gotta play square cards here or you don't play none in my house. No living thumb-nail can nick no cards in my place and get away with it. Three kings and two trays is better than three chickens and two eggs. If you don't like it, g'wan home."

He went out in his shirt sleeves to see how the knock-outs were reviving, and met Hal Smith returning from the pond, who reported progress toward consciousness. They walked back to the "hotel" together.

"Say, young fella," said Clinch in his soft, agreeable way, "you want to keep your eye peeled to-night."

"Why?" inquired Smith.

"Well, there'll be a lot o' folks here. There'll be strangers, too... Don't forget the State Troopers are looking for you."

"Do the State Troopers ever play detective?" asked Smith, smiling.

"Sure. They've been in here rigged out like peddlers and lumber-jacks and timber lookers."

"Did they ever get anything on you?"

"Not a thing."

"Can you always spot them, Mike?"

"No. But when a stranger shows up here who don't know nobody, he never sees nothing and he don't never learn nothing. He gets no hootch outa me. No, nor no craps and no cards. He gets his supper; that's what he gets ... and a dance, if there's ladies – and if any girl favours him. That's all the change any stranger gets out of Mike Clinch."

They had paused on the rough veranda in the hot October sunshine.

"Mike," suggested Smith carelessly, "wouldn't it pay you better to go straight?"

Clinch's small grey eyes, which had been roaming over the prospect of lake and forest, focussed on Smith's smiling features.

"What's that to you?" he asked.

"I'll be out of a job," remarked Smith, laughing, "if they ever land you."

Clinch's level gaze measured him; his mind was busy measuring him, too.

"Who the hell are you, anyway?" he asked. "I don't know. You stick up a man on the Ghost Lake Road and hide out here when the State Troopers come after you. And now you ask me if it pays better to go straight. Why didn't *you* go straight if you think it pays?"

"I haven't got a daughter to worry about," explained Smith. "If they get me it won't hurt anybody else."

A dull red tinge came out under Clinch's tan:

"Who asked *you* to worry about Eve?"

"She's a fine girl: that's all."

Clinch's steely glare measured the young man:

"You trying to make up to her?" he enquired gently.

"No. She has no use for me."

Clinch reflected, his cold tiger-gaze still fastened on Smith.

"You're right," he said after a moment. "Eve is a good girl. Some day I'll make a lady of her."

"She *is* one, Clinch."

At that Clinch reddened heavily – the first finer emotion ever betrayed before Smith. He did not say anything for a few moments, but his grim mouth worked. Finally:

"I guess you was a gentleman once before you went crooked, Hal," he said. "You act up like you once was... Say; there's only one thing on God's earth I care about. You've guessed it, too." He was off again upon his ruling passion.

"Eve," nodded Smith.

"Sure. She isn't my flesh and blood. But it seems like she's more, even. I want she should be a lady. It's *all* I want. That damned millionaire Harrod bust me. But he couldn't stop me giving Eve her schooling. And now all I'm livin' for is to be fixed so's to give her money to go to the city like a lady. I don't care how I make money; all I want is to make it. And I'm a-going to."

Smith nodded again.

Clinch, now obsessed by his monomania, went on with an oath:

"I can't make no money on the level after what Harrod done to me. And I gotta fix up Eve. What the hell do you mean by asking me would it pay me to travel straight I dunno."

"I was only thinking of Eve. A lady isn't supposed to have a crook for a father."

Clinch's grey eyes blazed for a moment, then their menacing glare dulled, died out into wintry fixity.

"I wan't born a crook," he said. "I ain't got no choice. And don't worry, young fella; they ain't a-going to get me."

"You can't go on beating the game forever, Clinch."

"I'm beating it – " he hesitated – "and it won't be so long, neither, before I turn over enough to let Eve live in the city like any lady, with her autymobile and her own butler and all her swell friends, in a big house like she is educated for – "

He broke off abruptly as a procession approached from the lake, escorting the battered gentry who now were able to wobble about a little.

One of them, a fox-faced trap thief named Earl Leverett, slunk hastily by as though expecting another kick from Clinch.

"G'wan inside, Earl, and act up right," said Clinch pleasantly. "You oughter have more sense than to start a fight in my place – you and Sid Hone and Harvey Chase. G'wan in and behave."

He and Smith followed the procession of damaged ones into the house.

The big unpainted room where a bar had once been was blue with cheap cigar smoke; the air reeked with the stench of beer and spirits. A score or more shambling forest louts in their dingy

Saturday finery were gathered there playing cards, shooting craps, lolling around tables and tilting slopping glasses at one another.

Heavy pleasantries were exchanged with the victims of Clinch's ponderous fists as they re-entered the room from which they had been borne so recently, feet first.

"Now, boys," said Clinch kindly, "act up like swell gents and behave friendly. And if any ladies come in for the chicken supper, why, gol dang it, we'll have a dance!"

### III

Toward sundown the first woodland nymph appeared – a half-shy, half-bold, willowy thing in the rosy light of the clearing.

Hal Smith, washing glasses and dishes on the back porch for Eve Strayer to dry, asked who the rustic beauty might be.

"Harvey Chase's sister," said Eve. "She shouldn't come here, but I can't keep her away and her brother doesn't care. She's only a child, too."

"Is there any harm in a chicken supper and a dance?"

Eve looked gravely at young Smith without replying.

Other girlish shapes loomed in the evening light. Some were met by gallants, some arrived at the veranda unescorted.

"Where do they all come from? Do they live in trees like dryads?" asked Smith.

"There are always squatters in the woods," she replied indifferently.

"Some of these girls come from Ghost Lake, I suppose."

"Yes; waitresses at the Inn."

"What music is there?"

"Jim Hastings plays a fiddle. I play the melodeon if they need me."

"What do you do when there's a fight?" he asked, with a side glance at her pure profile.

"What do you suppose I do? Fight, too?"

He laughed – mirthlessly – conscious always of his secret pity for this girl.

"Well," he said, "when your father makes enough to quit, he'll take you out of this. It's a vile hole for a young girl –"

"See here," she said, flushing; "you're rather particular for a young man who stuck up a tourist and robbed him of four thousand dollars."

"I'm not complaining on my own account," returned Smith, laughing; "Clinch's suits me."

"Well, don't concern yourself on my account, Hal Smith. And you'd better keep out of the dance, too, if there are any strangers there."

"You think a State Trooper may happen in?"

"It's likely. A lot of people come and go. We don't always know them." She opened a sliding wooden shutter and looked into the bar room. After a moment she beckoned him to her side.

"There are strangers there now," she said, " – that thin, dark man who looks like a Kanuk. And those two men shaking dice. I don't know who they are. I never before saw them."

But Smith had seen them at Ghost Lake Inn. One of them was Sard. Quintana's gang had arrived at Clinch's dump.

A moment later Clinch came through the pantry and kitchen and out onto the rear porch where Smith was washing glasses in a tub filled from an ever-flowing spring.

"I'm a-going to get supper," he said to Eve. "There'll be twenty-three plates." And to Smith: "Hal – you help Eve wait on the table. And if anybody acts up rough you slam him on the jaw – don't argue, don't wait – just slam him good, and I'll come on the hop."

"Who are the strangers, dad?" asked Eve.

"Don't nobody know 'em none, girlie. But they ain't State Troopers. They talk like they was foreign. One of 'em's English – the big, bony one with yellow hair and mustache."

"Did they give any names?" asked Smith.

"You bet. The stout, dark man calls himself Hongri Picket. French, I guess. The fat beak is a fella named Sard. Sanchez is the guy with a face like a Canada priest – José Sanchez – or something on that style. And then the yellow skinned young man is Nicole Salzar; the Britisher, Harry Beck; and that good lookin' dark gent with a little black Charlie Chaplin, he's Victor Georgiades."

"What are those foreigners doing in the North Woods, Clinch?" enquired Smith.

"Oh, they all give the same spiel – hire out in a lumber camp. But *they* ain't no lumberjacks," added Clinch contemptuously. "I don't know what they be – hootch runners maybe – or booze bandits – or they done something crooked som'ers r'other. It's safe to serve 'em drinks."

Clinch himself had been drinking. He always drank when preparing to cook.

He turned and went into the kitchen now, rolling up his shirt sleeves and relighting his clay pipe.

## IV

By nine o'clock the noisy chicken supper had ended; the table had been cleared; Jim Hastings was tuning his fiddle in the big room; Eve had seated herself before the battered melodeon.

"Ladies and gents," said Clinch in his clear, pleasant voice, which carried through the hubbub, "we're a-going to have a dance – thanks and beholden to Jim Hastings and my daughter Eve. Eve, she don't drink and she don't dance, so no use askin' and no hard feelin' toward nobody.

"So act up pleasant to one and all and have a good time and no rough stuff in no form, shape or manner, but behave like gents all and swell dames, like you was to a swarry on Fifth Avenue. Let's go!"

He went back to the pantry, taking no notice of the cheering. The fiddler scraped a fox trot, and Eve's melodeon joined in. A vast scuffling of heavily shod feet filled the momentary silence, accented by the shrill giggle of young girls.

"They're off," remarked Clinch to Smith, who stood at the pantry shelf prepared to serve whiskey or beer upon previous receipt of payment.

In the event of a sudden raid, the arrangements at Clinch's were quite simple. Two large drain pipes emerged from the kitchen floor beside Smith, and ended in Star Pond. In case of alarm the tub of beer was poured down one pipe; the whiskey down the other.

Only the trout in Star Pond would ever sample that hootch again.

Clinch, now slightly intoxicated, leaned heavily on the pantry shelf beside Smith, adjusting his pistol under his suspenders.

"Young fella," he said in his agreeable voice, "you're dead right. You sure said a face-full when you says to me, 'Eve's a lady, by God!' *You* oughta know. You was a gentleman yourself once. Even if you take to stickin' up tourists you know a lady when you see one. And you called the turn. She *is* a lady. All I'm livin' for is to get her down to the city and give her money to live like a lady. I'll do it yet... Soon!.. I'd do it to-morrow – to-night – if I dared... If I thought it sure fire... If I was dead certain I could get away with it... I've *got* the money. *Now!* ... Only it ain't in *money*... Smith?"

"Yes, Mike."

"You know me?"

"Sure."

"You size me up?"

"I do."

"All right. If you ever tell anyone I got money that ain't money I'll shoot you through the head."

"Don't worry, Clinch."

"I ain't. You're a crook; you won't talk. You're a gentleman, too. *They* don't sell out a pal. Say, Hal, there's only one fella I don't want to meet."

"Who's that, Mike?"

"Lemme tell you," continued Clinch, resting more heavily on the shelf while Smith, looking out through the pantry shutter at the dancing, listened intently.

"When I was in France in a Forestry Rig'ment," went on Clinch, lowering his always pleasant voice, "I was to Paris on leave a few days before they sent us home.

"I was in the washroom of a caffy – a-cleanin' up for supper, when dod-bang! into the place comes a-tumblin' a man with two cops pushing and kickin' him.

"They didn't see me in there for they locked the door on the man. He was a swell gent, too, in full dress and silk hat and all like that, and a opry cloak and white kid gloves, and mustache and French beard.

"When they locked him up he stood stock still and lit a cigarette, as cool as ice. Then he begun walkin' around looking for a way to get out; but there wasn't no way.

"Then he seen me and over he comes and talks English right away: 'Want to make a thousand francs, soldier?' sez he in a quick whisper. 'You're on,' sez I; 'show your dough.' 'Them Flics has went to get the Commissaire for to frisk me,' sez he. 'If they find this parcel on me I do twenty years in Noumea. Five years kills anybody out there.' 'What do you want I should do?' sez I, havin' no love for no cops, French or other. 'Take this packet and stick it in your overcoat,' sez he. 'Go to 13 roo Quinze Octobre and give it to the concierge for José Quintana.' And he shoves the packet on me and a thousand-franc note.

"Then he grabs me sudden and pulls open my collar. God, he was strong.

"What's the matter with you?" says I. 'Lemme go or I'll mash your mug flat.' 'Lemme see your identification disc,' he barks.

"Bein' in Paris for a bat, I had exchanged with my bunkie, Bill Hanson. 'Let him look,' thinks I; and he reads Bill's check.

"If you fool me," says he, 'I'll folly ye and I'll do you in if it takes the rest of my life. You understand?' 'Sure,' says I, me tongue in me cheek. 'Bong! Allez vous en!' says he.

"How the hell," sez I, 'do I get out of here?' 'You're a Yankee soldier. The Flics don't know you were in here. You go and kick on that door and make a holler.'

"So I done it good; and a cop opens and swears at me, but when he sees a Yankee soldier was locked in the wash-room by mistake, he lets me out, you bet."

Clinch smiled a thin smile, poured out three fingers of hooch.

"What else?" asked Smith quietly.

"Nothing much. I didn't go to no roo Quinze Octobre. But I don't never want to see that fella Quintana. I've been waiting till it's safe to sell – what was in that packet."

"Sell what?"

"What was in that packet," replied Clinch thickly.

"What was in it?"

"Sparklers – since you're so nosey."

"Diamonds?"

"And then some. I dunno what they're called. All I know is I'll croak Quintana if he even turns up askin' for 'em. He frisked somebody. I frisked him. I'll kill anybody who tries to frisk me."

"Where do you keep them?" enquired Smith naïvely.

Clinch looked at him, very drunk: "None o' your dinged business," he said very softly.

The dancing had become boisterous but not unseemly, although all the men had been drinking too freely.

Smith closed the pantry bar at midnight, by direction of Eve. Now he came out into the ballroom and mixed affably with the company, even dancing with Harvey Chase's sister once – a slender hoyden, all flushed and dishevelled, with a tireless mania for dancing which seemed to intoxicate her.

She danced, danced, danced, accepting any partner offered. But Smith's skill enraptured her and she refused to let him go when her beau, a late arrival, one Charlie Berry, slouched up to claim her.

Smith, always trying to keep Clinch and Quintana's men in view, took no part in the discussion; but Berry thought he was detaining Lily Chase and pushed him aside.

"Hold on, young man!" exclaimed Smith sharply. "Keep your hands to yourself. If your girl don't want to dance with you she doesn't have to."

Some of Quintana's gang came up to listen. Berry glared at Smith.

"Say," he said, "I seen you before somewhere. Wasn't you in Russia?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Yes, you was. You was an officer! What you doing at Clinch's?"

"What's that?" growled Clinch, shoving his way forward and shouldering the crowd aside.

"Who's this man, Mike?" demanded Berry.

"Well, who do you think he is?" asked Clinch thickly.

"I think he's gettin' the goods on you, that's what I think," yelled Berry.

"G'wan home, Charlie," returned Clinch. "G'wan, all o' you. The dance is over. Go peaceable, every one. Stop that fiddle!"

The music ceased. The dance was ended; they all understood that; but there was grumbling and demands for drinks.

Clinch, drunk but impassive, herded them through the door out into the starlight. There was scuffling, horse-play, but no fighting.

The big Englishman, Harry Beck, asked for accommodations for his party over night.

"Naw," said Clinch, "g'wan back to the Inn. I can't bother with you folks to-night." And as the others, Salzar, Georgiades, Picquet and Sanchez gathered about to insist, Clinch pushed them all out of doors in a mass.

"Get the hell out o' here!" he growled; and slammed the door.

He stood for a moment with head lowered, drunk, but apparently capable of reflection. Eve came from the melodeon and laid one slim hand on his arm.

"Go to bed, girlie," he said, not looking at her.

"You also, dad."

"No... I got business with Hal Smith."

Passing Smith, the girl whispered: "You look out for him and undress him."

Smith nodded, gravely preoccupied with coming events, and nerving himself to meet them.

He had no gun. Clinch's big automatic bulged under his armpit.

When the girl had ascended the creaking stairs and her door, above, closed, Clinch walked unsteadily to the door, opened it, fished out his pistol.

"Come on out," he said without turning.

"Where?" enquired Smith.

Clinch turned, lifted his square head; and the deadly glare in his eyes left Smith silent.

"You comin'?"

"Sure," said Smith quietly.

But Clinch gave him no chance to close in: it was death even to swerve. Smith walked slowly out into the starlight, ahead of Clinch – slowly forward in the luminous darkness.

"Keep going," came Clinch's quiet voice behind him. And, after they had entered the woods, – "Bear to the right."

Smith knew now. The low woods were full of sink-holes. They were headed for the nearest one. On the edge of the thing they halted. Smith turned and faced Clinch.

"What's the idea?" he asked without a quaver.

"Was you in Roosia?"

"Yes."

"Was you an officer?"

"I was."

"Then you're spyin'. You're a cop."

"You're mistaken."

"Ah, don't hand me none like that! You're a State Trooper or a Secret Service guy, or a plain, dirty cop. And I'm a-going to croak you."

"I'm not in any service, now."

"Wasn't you an army officer?"

"Yes. Can't an officer go wrong?"

"Soft stuff. Don't feed it to me. I told you too much anyway. I was babblin' drunk. I'm drunk now, but I got sense. D'you think I'll run chances of sittin' in State's Prison for the next ten years and leave Eve out here alone? No. I gotta shoot you, Smith. And I'm a-going to do it. G'wan and say what you want ... if you think there's some kind o' god you can square before you croak."

"If you go to the chair for murder, what good will it do Eve?" asked Smith. His lips were crackling dry; he moistened them.

"Sink holes don't talk," said Clinch. "G'wan and square yourself, if you're the church kind."

"Clinch," said Smith unsteadily, "if you kill me now you're as good as dead yourself. Quintana is here."

"Say, don't hand me that," retorted Clinch. "Do you square yourself or no?"

"I tell you Quintana's gang were at the dance to-night – Picquet, Salzar, Georgiades, Sard, Beck, José Sanchez – the one who looks like a French priest. Maybe he had a beard when you saw him in that café wash-room – "

"What!" shouted Clinch in sudden fury. "What yeh talkin' about, you poor dumb dingo! Yeh fixin' to scare me? What do *you* know about Quintana? Are you one of Quintana's gang, too? Is that what you're up to, hidin' out at Star Pond. Come on, now, out with it! I'll have it all out of you now, Hal Smith, before I plug you – "

He came lurching forward, swinging his heavy pistol as though he meant to brain his victim, but he halted after the first step or two and stood there, a shadowy bulk, growling, enraged, undecided.

And, as Smith looked at him, two shadows detached themselves from the trees behind Clinch – silently – silently glided behind – struck in utter silence.

Down crashed Clinch, black-jacked, his face in the ooze. His pistol flew from his hand, struck Smith's leg; and Smith had it at the same instant and turned it like lightning on the murderous shadows.

"Hands up! Quick!" he cried, at bay now, and his back to the sink-hole.

Pistol levelled, he bent one knee, pushed Clinch over on his back, lest the ooze suffocate him.

"Now," he said coolly, "what do you bums want of Mike Clinch?"

"Who are you?" came a sullen voice. "This is none o' your bloody business. We want Clinch, not you."

"What do you want of Clinch?"

"Take your gun off us!"

"Answer, or I'll let go at you. What do you want of Clinch?"

"Money. What do you think?"

"You're here to stick up Clinch?" enquired Smith.

"Yes. What's that to you?"

"What has Clinch done to you?"

"He stuck *us* up, that's what! Now, are you going to keep out of this?"

"No."

"We ain't going to hurt Clinch."

"You bet you're not. Where's the rest of your gang?"

"What gang?"

"Quintana's," said Smith, laughing. A wild exhilaration possessed him. His flanks and rear were protected by the sink-hole. He had Quintana's gang – two of them – over his pistol.

"Turn your backs and sit down," he said. As the shadowy forms hesitated, he picked up a stick and hurled it at them. They sat down hastily, hands up, backs toward him.

"You'll both die where you sit," remarked Smith, "if you yell for help."

Clinch sighed heavily, stirred, groped on the damp leaves with his hands.

"I say," began the voice which Smith identified as Harry Beck's, "if you'll come in with us on this it will pay you, young man."

"No," drawled Smith, "I'll go it alone."

"It can't be done, old dear. You'll see if you try it on."

"Who'll stop me? Quintana?"

"Come," urged Beck, "and be a good pal. You can't manage it alone. We've got all night to make Clinch talk. We know how, too. You'll get your share – "

"Oh, stow it," said Smith, watching Clinch, who was reviving. He sat up presently, and put both hands over his head. Smith touched him silently on the shoulder and he turned his heavy, square head in a dazed way. Blood striped his visage. He gazed dully at Smith for a little while, then, seeming to recollect, the old glare began to light his pale eyes.

The next instant, however, Beck spoke again, and Clinch turned in astonishment and saw the two figures sitting there with backs toward Smith and hands up.

Clinch stared at the squatting forms, then slowly moved his head and looked at Smith and his levelled pistol.

"We know how to make a man squeal," said Harry Beck suddenly. "He'll talk. We can make Clinch talk, no fear! Leave it to us, old pal. Are you with us?" He started to look around over his shoulder and Smith hurled another stick and hit him in the face.

"Quiet there, Harry," he said. "What's my share if I go in with you?"

"One sixth, same's we all get."

"What's it worth?" asked Smith, with a motion of caution toward Clinch.

"If I say a million you'll tell me I lie. But it's nearer three – or you can have my share. Is it a go?"

"You'll not hurt Clinch when he comes to?"

"We'll make him talk, that's all. It may hurt him some."

"You won't kill him?"

"I swear by God – "

"Wait! Isn't it better to shoot him after he squeals? Here's a lovely sink-hole handy."

"Right-o! We'll make him talk first and then shove him in. Are you with us?"

"If you turn your head I'll blow the face off you, Harry," said Smith, cautioning Clinch to silence with a gesture.

"All right. Only you better make up your mind. That cove is likely to wake up now at any time," grumbled Beck.

Clinch looked at Smith. The latter smiled, leaned over, and whispered:

"Can you walk all right?"

Clinch nodded.

"Well, we'd better beat it. Quintana's whole gang is in these woods, somewhere, hunting for you, and they might stumble on us here, at any moment." And, to the two men in front: "Lie down flat on your faces. Don't stir; don't speak; or it's you for the sink-hole... Lie down, I tell you! That's it. Don't move till I tell you to."

Clinch got up from where he was sitting, cast one murderous glance at the prostrate forms, then followed Smith, noiselessly, over the stretch of sphagnum moss.

When they reached the house they saw Eve standing on the steps in her night-dress and bare feet, holding a lantern.

"Daddy," she whimpered, "I was frightened. I didn't know where you had gone – "

Clinch put his arm around her, turned his bloody face and looked at Smith.

"It's *this*," he said, "that I ain't forgetting, young fella. What you done for me you done for *her* .

"I gotta live to make a lady of her. That's why," he added thickly, "I'm much obliged to you, Hal Smith... Go to bed, girlie – "

"You're bleeding, dad?"

"Aw, a twig scratched me. I been in the woods with Hal. G'wan to bed."

He went to the sink and washed his face, dried it, kissed the girl, and gave her a gentle shove toward the stairs.

"Hal and I is sittin' up talkin' business," he remarked, bolting the door and all the shutters.

When the girl had gone, Clinch went to a closet and brought back two Winchester rifles, two shot guns, and a box of ammunition.

"Goin' to see it out with me, Hal?"

"Sure," smiled Smith.

"Aw' right. Have a drink?"

"No."

"Aw' right. Where'll you set?"

"Anywhere."

"Aw' right. Set over there. They may try the back porch. I'll jest set here a spell, n'then I'll kind er mosey 'round... Plug the first fella that tries a shutter, Hal."

"You bet."

Clinch came over and held out his hand.

"You said a face-full that time when you says to me, 'Clinch,' you says, 'Eve *is* a lady.' ... I gotta fix her up. I gotta be alive to do it... That's why I'm greatly obliged to yeh, Hal."

He took his rifle and walked slowly toward the pantry.

"You bet," he muttered, "she *is* a lady, so help me God."

## Episode Three ON STAR PEAK

### I

MIKE CLINCH regarded the jewels taken from José Quintana as legitimate loot acquired in war.

He was prepared to kill anybody who attempted to take the gems from him.

At the very possibility his ruling passion blazed – his mania to make of Eve Strayer a grand lady.

But now, what he had feared for years had happened. Quintana had found him, – Quintana, after all these years, had discovered the identity and dwelling place of the obscure American soldier who had robbed him in the wash-room of a Paris café. And Quintana was now in America, here in this very wilderness, tracking the man who had despoiled him.

Clinch, in his shirt-sleeves, carrying a rifle, came out on the log veranda and sat down to think it over.

He began to realise that he was likely to have trouble with a man as cold-blooded and as dogged as himself.

Nor did he doubt that those with Quintana were desperate men.

On whom could he count? On nobody unless he paid their hire. None among the lawless men who haunted his backwoods "hotel" at Star Pond would lift a finger to help him. Almost any among them would have robbed him, – murdered him, probably, – if it were known that jewels were hidden in the house.

He could not trust Jake Kloon; Leverett was as treacherous as only a born coward can be; Sid Hone, Harvey Chase, Blommers, Byron Hastings, – he knew them all too well to trust them, – a sullen, unscrupulous pack, partly cowardly, always fierce, – as are any creatures that live furtively, feed only by their wits, and slink through life just outside the frontiers of law.

And yet, one of this gang had stood by him – Hal Smith – the man he himself had been about to slay.

Clinch got up from the bench where he had been sitting and walked down to the pond where Hal Smith sat cleaning trout.

"Hal," he said, "I been figuring some. Quintana don't dare call in the constables. I can't afford to. Quintana and I've got to settle this on our own."

Smith slit open a ten-inch trout, stripped it, flung the entrails out into the pond, soused the fish in water, and threw it into a milk pan.

"Whose jewels were they in the beginning?" he enquired carelessly.

"How do I know?"

"If you ever found out – "

"I don't want to. I got them in the war, anyway. And it don't make no difference how I got 'em; Eve's going to be a lady if I go to the chair for it. So that's that."

Smith slit another trout, gutted it, flung away the viscera but laid back the roe.

"Shame to take them in October," he remarked, "but people must eat."

"Same's me," nodded Clinch; "I don't want to kill no one, but Eve she's gotta be a lady and ride in her own automobile with the proudest."

"Does Eve know about the jewels?"

Clinch's pale eyes, which had been roving over the wooded shores of Star Pond, reverted to Smith.

"I'd cut my throat before I'd tell her," he said softly.

"She wouldn't stand for it?"

"Hal, when you said to me, 'Eve's a lady, by God!' you swallowed the hull pie. That's the answer. A lady don't stand for what you and I don't bother about."

"Suppose she learns that you robbed the man who robbed somebody else of these jewels."

Clinch's pale eyes were fixed on him: "Only you and me know," he said in his pleasant voice.

"Quintana knows. His gang knows."

Clinch's smile was terrifying. "I guess she ain't never likely to know nothing, Hal."

"What do you purpose to do, Mike?"

"Still hunt."

"For Quintana?"

"I might mistake him for a deer. Them accidents is likely, too."

"If Quintana catches you it will go hard with you, Mike."

"Sure. I know."

"He'll torture you to make you talk."

"You think I'd talk, Hal?"

Smith looked up into the light-coloured eyes. The pupils were pin points. Then he went on cleaning fish.

"Hal?"

"What?"

"If they get me, – but no matter; they ain't a-going to get me."

"Were you going to tell me where those jewels are hidden, Mike?" enquired the young man, still busy with his fish. He did not look around when he spoke. Clinch's murderous gaze was fastened on the back of his head.

"Don't go to gettin' too damn nosey, Hal," he said in his always agreeable voice.

Smith soused all the fish in water again: "You'd better tell somebody if you go gunning for Quintana."

"Did I ask your advice?"

"You did not," said the young man, smiling.

"All right. Mind your business."

Smith got up from the water's edge with his pan of trout:

"That's what I shall do, Mike," he said, laughing. "So go on with your private war; it's no button off *my* pants if Quintana gets you."

He went away toward the ice-house with the trout. Eve Strayer, doing chamber work, watched the young man from an upper room.

The girl's instinct was to like Smith, – but that very instinct aroused her distrust. What was a man of his breeding and education doing at Clinch's dump? Why was he content to hang around and do chores? A man of his type who has gone crooked enough to stick up a tourist in an automobile nourishes higher – though probably perverted – ambitions than a dollar a day and board.

She heard Clinch's light step on the uncarpeted stair; went on making up Smith's bed; and smiled as her step-father came into the room, still carrying his rifle.

He had something else in his hand, too, – a flat, thin packet wrapped in heavy paper and sealed all over with black wax.

"Girlie," he said, "I want you should do a little errand for me this morning. If you're spry it won't take long – time to go there and get back to help with noon dinner."

"Very well, dad."

"Go git your pants on, girlie."

"You want me to go into the woods?"

"I want you to go to the hole in the rocks under Star Peak and lay this packet in the hootch cache."

She nodded, tucked in the sheets, smoothed blanket and pillow with deft hands, went out to her own room. Clinch seated himself and turned a blank face to the window.

It was a sudden decision. He realised now that he couldn't keep the jewels in his house. War was on with Quintana. The "hotel" would be the goal for Quintana and his gang. And for Smith, too, if ever temptation overpowered him. The house was liable to an attempt at robbery any night, now; – any day, perhaps. It was no place for the packet he had taken from José Quintana.

Eve came in wearing grey shirt, breeches, and puttees. Clinch gave her the packet.

"What's in it, dad?" she asked smilingly.

"Don't you get noseey, girlie. Come here."

She went to him. He put his left arm around her.

"You like me some, don't you, girlie?"

"You know it, dad."

"All right. You're all that matters to me ... since your mother went and died ... after a year... That was crool, girlie. Only a year. Well, I ain't cared none for nobody since – only you, girlie."

He touched the packet with his forefinger:

"If I step out, that's yours. But I ain't a-going to step out. Put it with the hootch. You know how to move that keystone?"

"Yes, dad."

"And watch out that no game protector and none of that damn millionaire's wardens see you in the woods. No, nor none o' these here fancy State Troopers. You gotta watch out *this* time, Eve. It means everything to us – to you, girlie – and to me. Go tip-toe. Lay low, coming and going. Take a rifle."

Eve ran to her bed-room and returned with her Winchester and belt.

"You shoot to kill," said Clinch grimly, "if anyone wants to stop you. But lay low and you won't need to shoot nobody, girlie. G'wan out the back way; Hal's in the ice house."

## II

Slim and straight as a young boy in her grey shirt and breeches, Eve continued on lightly through the woods, her rifle over her shoulder, her eyes of gentian-blue always alert.

The morning turned warm; she pulled off her soft felt hat, shook out her clipped curls, stripped open the shirt at her snowy throat where sweat glimmered like melted frost.

The forest was lovely in the morning sunlight – lovely and still – save for the blue-jays – for the summer birds had gone and only birds destined to a long Northern winter remained.

Now and then, ahead of her, she saw a ruffed grouse wandering in the trail. These, and a single tiny grey bird with a dreary note interminably repeated, were the only living things she saw except here and there a summer-battered butterfly of the Vanessa tribe flitting in some stray sunbeam.

The haunting odour of late autumn was in the air – delicately acrid – the scent of frost-killed brake and ripening wild grasses, of brilliant dead leaves and black forest loam pungent with mast from beech and oak.

Eve's tread was light on the moist trail; her quick eyes missed nothing – not the dainty imprint of deer, fresh made, nor the sprawling insignia of rambling raccoons – nor the big barred owl huddled on a pine limb overhead, nor, where the swift gravelly reaches of the brook caught sunlight, did she miss the swirl and furrowing and milling of painted trout on the spawning beds.

Once she took cover, hearing something stirring; but it was only a yearling buck that came out of the witch-hazel to stare, stamp, then wheel and trot away, displaying the danger signal.

In her cartridge-pouch she carried the flat, sealed packet which Clinch had trusted to her. The sack swayed gently as she strode on, slapping her left hip at every step; and always her subconscious mind remained on guard and aware of it; and now and then she dropped her hand to feel of the pouch and strap.

The character of the forest was now changing as she advanced. The first tamaracks appeared, slim, silvery trunks, crowned with the gold of autumn foliage, outer sentinels of that vast maze of swamp and stream called Owl Marsh, the stronghold and refuge of forest wild things – sometimes the sanctuary of hunted men.

From Star Peak's left flank an icy stream clatters down to the level floor of the woods, here; and it was here that Eve had meant to quench her thirst with a mouthful of sweet water.

But as she approached the tiny ford, warily, she saw a saddled horse tied to a sapling and a man seated on a mossy log.

The trappings of horse, the grey-green uniform of the man, left no room for speculation; a trooper of the State Constabulary was seated there.

His cap was off; his head rested on his palm. Elbow on knee, he sat there gazing at the water – watching the slim fish, perhaps, darting up stream toward their bridal-beds hidden far away at the headwaters.

A detour was imperative. The girl, from the shelter of a pine, looked out cautiously at the trooper. The sudden sight of him had merely checked her; now the recognition of his uniform startled her heart out of its tranquil rhythm and set the blood burning in her cheeks.

There was a memory of such a man seared into the girl's very soul; – a man whose head and shoulders resembled this man's, – who had the same bright hair, the same slim and powerful body, – and who moved, too, as this young man moved.

The trooper stirred, lifted his head to relight his pipe.

The girl knew him. Her heart stood still; then heart and blood ran riot and she felt her knees tremble, – felt weak as she rested against the pine's huge trunk and covered her face with unsteady fingers.

Until the moment, Eve had never dreamed what the memory of this man really meant to her, – never dreamed that she had capacity for emotion so utterly overwhelming.

Even now confusion, shame, fear were paramount. All she wanted was to get away, – get away and still her heart's wild beating, – control the strange tremor that possessed her, recover mind and sense and breath.

She drew her hand from her eyes and looked upon the man she had attempted to kill, – upon the young man who had wrestled her off her feet and handcuffed her, – and who had bathed her bleeding mouth with sphagnum, – and who had kissed her hands —

She was trembling so that she became frightened. The racket of the brook in his ears safeguarded her in a measure. She bent over nearly double, her rifle at a trail, and cautiously began the detour.

When at length the wide circle through the woods had been safely accomplished and Eve was moving out through the thickening ranks of tamarack, her heart, which seemed to suffocate her, quieted; and she leaned against a shoulder of rock, strangely tired.

After a while she drew from her pocket *his* handkerchief, and looked at it. The square of cambric bore his initials, J. S. Blood from her lip remained on it. She had not washed out the spots.

She put it to her lips again, mechanically. A faint odour of tobacco still clung to it.

By every law of loyalty, pride, self-respect, she should have held this man her enemy. Instead, she held his handkerchief against her lips, – crushed it there suddenly, closing her eyes while the colour surged and surged through her skin from throat to hair.

Then, wearily, she lifted her head and looked out into the grey and empty vista of her life, where the dreary years seemed to stretch like milestones away, away into an endless waste.

She put the handkerchief into her pocket, shouldered her rifle, moved on without looking about her, – a mistake which only the emotion of the moment could account for in a girl so habituated to caution, – for she had gone only a few rods before a man's strident voice halted her:

*"Halte là! Crosse en air!"*

"Drop that rifle!" came another voice from behind her. "You're covered! Throw your gun on the ground!"

She stood as though paralysed. To the right and left she heard people trampling through the thicket toward her.

"Down with that gun, damn you!" repeated the voice, breathless from running. All around her men came floundering and crashing toward her through the undergrowth. She could see some of them.

As she stooped to place her rifle on the dead leaves, she drew the flat packet from her cartridge sack at the same time and slid it deftly under a rotting log. Then, calm but very pale, she stood upright to face events.

The first man wore a red and yellow bandanna handkerchief over the lower half of his face, pulled tightly across a bony nose. He held a long pistol nearly parallel to his own body; and when he came up to where she was standing he poked the muzzle into her stomach.

She did not flinch; he said nothing; she looked intently into the two ratty eyes fastened on her over the edge of his bandanna.

Five other men were surrounding her, but they all wore white masks of vizard shape, revealing chin and mouth.

They were different otherwise, also, wearing various sorts and patterns of sport clothes, brand new, and giving them an odd, foreign appearance.

What troubled her most was the silence they maintained. The man wearing the bandanna was the only one who seemed at all a familiar figure, – merely, perhaps, because he was American in build, clothing, and movement.

He took her by the shoulder, turned her around and gave her a shove forward. She staggered a step or two; he gave her another shove and she comprehended that she was to keep on going.

Presently she found herself in a steep, wet deer-trail rising upward through a gully. She knew that runaway. It led up Star Peak.

Behind her as she climbed she heard the slopping, panting tread of men; her wind was better than theirs; she climbed lithely upward, setting a pace which finally resulted in a violent jerk backward, – a savage, wordless admonition to go more slowly.

As she climbed she wondered whether she should have fired an alarm shot on the chance of the State Trooper, Stormont, hearing it.

But she had thought only of the packet at the moment of surprise. And now she wondered whether, when freed, she could ever again find that rotting log.

Up, up, always up along the wet gully, deep with silt and frost-splintered rock, she toiled, the heavy gasping of men behind her. Twice she was jerked to a halt while her escort rested.

Once, without turning, she said unsteadily: "Who are you? What have I done to you?"

There was no reply.

"What are you going to do to me – " she began again, and was shaken by the shoulder until silent.

At last the vast arch of the eastern sky sprang out ahead, where stunted spruces stood out against the sunshine and the intense heat of midday fell upon a bare table-land of rock and moss and fern.

As she came out upon the level, the man behind her took both her arms and pulled them back and somebody bandaged her eyes. Then a hand closed on her left arm and, so guided, she stumbled and crept forward across the rocks for a few moments until her guide halted her and forced her into a sitting position on a smooth, flat boulder.

She heard the crunching of heavy feet all around her, whispering made hoarse by breath exhausted, movement across rock and scrub, retreating steps.

For an interminable time she sat there alone in the hot sun, drenched to the skin in sweat, listening, thinking, striving to find a reason for this lawless outrage.

After a long while she heard somebody coming across the rocks, stiffened as she listened with some vague presentiment of evil.

Somebody had halted beside her. After a pause she was aware of nimble fingers busy with the bandage over her eyes.

At first, when freed, the light blinded her. By degrees she was able to distinguish the rocky crest of Star Peak, with the tops of tall trees appearing level with the rocks from depths below.

Then she turned, slowly, and looked at the man who had seated himself beside her.

He wore a white mask over a delicate, smoothly shaven face.

His soft hat and sporting clothes were dark grey, evidently new. And she noticed his hands – long, elegantly made, smooth, restless, playing with a pencil and some sheets of paper on his knees.

As she met his brilliant eyes behind the mask, his delicate, thin lips grew tense in what seemed to be a smile – or a soundless sort of laugh.

"Veree happee," he said, "to make the acquaintance. Pardon my unceremony, miss, but onlee necissitee compels. Are you, perhaps, a little rested?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Then, if you permit, we proceed with affairs of moment. You will be sufficiently kind to write down what I say. Yes?"

He placed paper and pencil in Eve's hand. Without demurring or hesitation she made ready to write, her mind groping wildly for the reason of it all.

"Write," he said, with his silent laugh which was more like the soundless snarl of a lynx unafraid:

"To Mike Clinch, my fathaire, from his child, Eve... I am hostage, held by José Quintana. Pay what you owe him and I go free.

"For each day delay he sends to you one finger which will be severed from my right hand – "

Eve's slender fingers trembled; she looked up at the masked man, stared steadily into his brilliant eyes.

"Proceed miss, if you are so amiable," he said softly.

She wrote on: " – One finger for every day's delay. The whole hand at the week's end. The other hand then, finger by finger. Then, alas! the right foot – "

Eve trembled.

"Proceed," he said softly.

She wrote: "If you agree you shall pay what you owe to José Quintana in this manner: you shall place a stick at the edge of the Star Pond where the Star rivulet flows out. Upon this stick you shall tie a white rag. At the foot of the stick you shall lay the parcel which contains your indebt to José Quintana.

"Failing this, by to-night *one finger* at sunset."

The man paused: Eve waited, dumb under the surging confusion in her brain. A sort of incredulous horror benumbed her, through which she still heard and perceived.

"Be kind enough to sign it with your name," said the man pleasantly.

Eve signed.

Then the masked man took the letter, got up, removed his hat.

"I am Quintana," he said. "I keep my word. A thousand thanks and apologies, miss. I trust that your detention may be brief and not too disagreeable. I place at your feet my humble respects."

He bowed, put on his hat, and walked quickly away. And she saw him descend the rocks to the eastward, where the peak slopes.

When Quintana had disappeared behind the summit scrub and rocks, Eve slowly stood up and looked about her at the rocky pulpit so familiar.

There was only one way out. Quintana had gone that way. His men no doubt guarded it. Otherwise, sheer precipices confronted her.

She walked to the western edge where a sheet of slippery reindeer moss clothed the rock. Below the mountain fell away to the valley where she had been made prisoner.

She looked out over the vast panorama of wilderness and mountain, range on range stretching blue to the horizon. She looked down into the depths of the valley where deep under the flaming foliage of October, somewhere, a State Trooper was sitting, cheek on hand, beside a waterfall – or, perhaps, riding slowly through a forest which she might never gaze upon again.

There was a noise on the rocks behind her. A masked man came out of the spruce scrub, laid a blanket on the rocks, placed a loaf of bread, some cheese, and a tin pail full of water upon it, motioned her, and went away through the dwarf spruces.

Eve walked slowly to the blanket. She drank out of the tin pail. Then she set aside the food, lay down, and buried her quivering face in her arms.

The sun was half way between zenith and horizon when she heard somebody coming, and rose to a sitting posture. Her visitor was Quintana.

He came up to her quite close, stood with glittering eyes intent upon her.

After a moment he handed her a letter.

She could scarcely unfold it, she trembled so:

"Girlie, for God's sake give that packet to Quintana and come on home. I'm near crazy with it all. What the hell's anything worth beside you girlie. I don't give a damn for nothing only you, so come on quick. Dad."

After a little while she lifted her eyes to Quintana.

"So," he said quietly, "you are the little she-fox that has learned tricks already."

"What do you mean?"

"Where is that packet?"

"I haven't it."

"Where is it?"

She shook her head slightly.

"You had a packet," he insisted fiercely. "Look here! Regard!" and he spread out a penciled sheet in Clinch's hand:

"José Quintana:

"You win. She's got that stuff with her. Take your damn junk and let my girl go.

*"Mike Clinch."*

"Well," said Quintana, a thin, strident edge to his tone.

"My father is mistaken. I haven't any packet."

The man's visage behind his mask flushed darkly. Without warning or ceremony he caught Eve by the throat and tore open her shirt. Then, hissing and cursing and panting with his own violence, he searched her brutally and without mercy – flung her down and tore off her spiral puttees and even her shoes and stockings, now apparently beside himself with fury, puffing, gasping, always with a fierce, nasal sort of whining undertone like an animal worrying its kill.

"Cowardly beast!" she panted, fighting him with all her strength – "filthy, cowardly beast! – " striking at him, wrenching his grasp away, snatching at the disordered clothing half stripped from her.

His hunting knife fell clattering and she fought to get it, but he struck her with his open hand, knocking her down at his feet, and stood glaring at her with every tooth bared.

"So," he cried, "I give you ten minutes, make up your mind, tell me what you do with that packet."

He wiped the blood from his face where she had struck him.

"You don't know José Quintana. No! You shall make his acquaintance. Yes!"

Eve got up on naked feet, quivering from head to foot, striving to button the grey shirt at her throat.

"Where?" he demanded, beside himself.

Her mute lips only tightened.

"Ver' well, by God!" he cried. "I go make me some fire. You like it, eh? We shall put one toe in the fire until it burn off. Yes? Eh? How you like it? Eh?"

The girl's trembling hands continued busy with her clothing.

"So!" he said, hoarsely, "you remain dumb! Well, then, in ten minutes you shall talk!"

He walked toward her, pushed her savagely aside, and strode on into the spruce thicket.

The instant he disappeared Eve caught up the knife he had dropped, knelt down on the blanket and fell to cutting it into strips.

The hunting knife was like a razor; the feverish business was accomplished in a few moments, the pieces knotted, the cord strained in a desperate test over her knee.

And now she ran to the precipice where, ten feet below, the top of a great pine protruded from the gulf.

On the edge of the abyss was a spruce root. It looked dead, wedged deep between two rocks; but with all her strength she could not pull it out.

Sobbing, breathless, she tied her blanket rope to this, threw the other end over the cliff's edge, and, not giving herself time to think, lay flat, grasped the knotted line, swung off.

Knot by knot she went down. Half-way her naked feet brushed the needles. She looked over her shoulder, behind and down. Then, teeth clenched, she lowered herself steadily as she had learned to do in the school gymnasium, down, down, until her legs came astride of a pine limb.

It bent, swayed, gave with her, letting her sag to a larger limb below. This she clasped, letting go her rope.

Already, from the mountain's rocky crest above, she heard excited cries. Once, on her breakneck descent, she looked up through the foliage of the pine; and she saw, far up against the sky, a white-masked face looking over the edge of the precipice.

But if it were Quintana or another of his people she could not tell. And, again looking down, she began again the terrible descent.

An hour later, Trooper Stormont of the State Constabulary, sat his horse in amazement to see a ragged, breathless, boyish figure speeding toward him among the tamaracks, her naked feet splashing through pool and mire and sphagnum.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed as she flung herself against his stirrup, sobbing, hysterical, and clinging to his knee.

"Take me back," she stammered, " – take me back to daddy! I can't – go on – another step – "

He leaned down, swung her up to his saddle in front, holding her cradled in his arms.

"Lie still," he said coolly; "you're all right now."

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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