

The POOL of FLAME

by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLSWORTH YOUNG

COPYRIGHT 1909 by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

CHAPTER I.

A still and sultry dusk had fallen, closing an oppressive, wearying day; one of those days whose sole function seems to reside in rendering us irritably conscious of our too-close castings of too-solid flesh; whose humid and inert atmosphere, sodden with tepid moisture, clings palpably to the body, causing men to feel as if they crawled, half-suffocated, at the bottom of a sea of rarefied water.

The hour may have been eight; it may have been not quite that, but it was almost dark. The windows were oblongs, black at night in the yellow walls of O'Rourke's bedchamber in the Hotel d'Orient, Monte Carlo.

I have the honor to make known to you the O'Rourke of Castle O'Rourke in the county of Galway, Ireland; otherwise and more widely known as Colonel Terence O'Rourke; a chevalier of the Legion of Honor of France; sometime an officer in the Foreign Legion in Algiers; a wanderer, spendthrift, free-lance, cosmopolitan—a gentleman-adventurer, he's been termed.

He was dressing for dinner. The glare of half a dozen electric bulbs discovered him all but ready for public appearance—not, however, quite ready. In his shirt sleeves he faced a cheval-glass, pluckily (if with the haggard eye of exasperation) endeavoring to outmaneuver a demon of inanimate perversity which had entered into his dress tie, inciting it to refuse to assume, for all his coaxing and his stratagems, that effect of nonchalant perfection so much sought after, so seldom achieved.

Patently was the thing possessed by a devil; O'Rourke made no manner of doubt of that. Though for minutes at a time he fumbled, fidgeted, fumed, it was without avail.

His room itself was in a state of considerable disorder—something due mainly to O'Rourke's characteristic efforts to find just what he might happen to desire at any given time without troubling to think where it ought properly to be.

Something of this confusion, mirrored in the glass, was likewise reflected in O'Rourke's eyes, what time he paused for breath and profanity. "Faith, 'tis worse than a daw's nest, the place," he admitted, scandalized. "How ever did I—one lone man—do all that, will ye be telling me?" He flung out two helpless baffled hands, and let them fall. After a meditative pause he added: "Damm that Alsation!"—with reference to his latest and least competent valet, who had but recently been discharged with a flea in his ear and a mouth's unearned wage in his pocket. "For knowing me ways," sighed O'Rourke, "there was never anyone the like of Danny."

For as many as three lifelong days this man had been reduced to the necessity of dressing himself with his own fair hands—and that at least thrice daily, who did nothing by halves. And, somehow, mysteriously, his discarded garments had for the most part remained where he had thrown them, despite the earnest efforts of the femme de chambre to restore something resembling order from this man-made chaos. For servants all liked well the O'Rourke, improvident soul that he was, freehanded to a fault.

You are invited to picture to yourself O'Rourke as invariably he was in one of his not infrequent but ever transient phases of affluence: that is, a very magnificent figure indeed. Standing a bit over six feet, deep of chest and lean of flank, with his long, straight legs he looked what he had been meant to be, a man of arms and action. His head was shapely, its dark hair curling the least in the world; and, incredibly stained, a transparent brown, his features were lean, eager, and rendered very attractive by quick boyish eyes in whose warm blue-gray depths humor twinkled more often than not, though those same eyes were not seldom thoughtful, a trace wistful, perhaps, with the look of one who recalls dear memories, old friends and sweethearts loved and lost.

For he had begun to live early in life and had much to look back upon, though for all that it's doubtful if he were more than thirty at the time he became involved in the fortunes of the Pool of Flame.

For the rest of him, barring the refractory tie, the man was strikingly well groomed, while his surroundings spoke for comfortable circumstances. On the authority of the absent and regretted Danny, who had long served the O'Rourke in the intimate capacities of body-servant, confidant and chancellor of the exchequer (this last, of course, whenever there happened to be any exchequer to require a chan-cellor), there was never anyone at all who could spend money or wear clothes like himself, meaning the master. And at this time O'Rourke was ostensibly in funds and consequently (as the saying runs) cutting a wide swath. Heaven and himself only knew the limits of his resources; but his manner a Monty Cristo might have

applied to advantage. His play was a wonder of the Casino; for the matter of that, his high-handed and extravagant ways had made the entire Principality of Monaco conscious of his presence in the land. And you fall in the least to understand the nature of the man if you think for a moment that it lured him to be admired, pointed out, courted, pursued. He was, indeed, never so splendid as when aware that he occupied the public eye. In short, he was just an Irishman.

So, then, it's nothing wonderful that he should seem a thought final about the set of his tie.

Now as he stood scowling at his image, and wishing from the bottom of his heart he had never been fool enough to let Danny leave him, and calling fervent blessings down upon the head of the fiend who first designed modern evening-dress for men—he found himself suddenly with a mind divested of any care whatever and attentive alone to a sound which came to him faintly, borne upon the heavy wings of the sluggish evening air. It was nothing more nor less than a woman singing softly to herself (humming would probably be the more accurate term), and it was merely the tune that caught his fancy; a bit of an old song he himself had once been wont to sing, upon a time when he had been a happier man. It seemed strange to hear it there, stranger still that the woman's voice, indistinct as it was, should have such familiar ring in his memory. He frowned in wonder and shook his head. "The age of miracles is past," he muttered; "would never be herself. I've had me chance—and forfeited it. 'Twill not come to me a second time."

The singing ceased. Of a sudden O'Rourke swore with needless heat, and, plucking away the offending tie, cast it savagely from him. "The divie fly away with ye!" he said. "Is it bent on driving me mad ye are? I'd give me fortune to have Danny back!"

Me fortune—faith!" He laughed the word to bitter scorn. "Tis myself that never had the least of anything like that without 'twas feminine—with a 'mis' tacked onto the front of it!" And he strode away to the window to cool off.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

Even as he watched, stark night fell, black as a pocket beneath a portentous pall of cloud. . . . Far out upon the swelling bosom of the Mediterranean a cluster of dim lights betrayed a stealthy coasting steamer.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

Even as he watched, stark night fell, black as a pocket beneath a portentous pall of cloud. . . . Far out upon the swelling bosom of the Mediterranean a cluster of dim lights betrayed a stealthy coasting steamer.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

It was like him to forget his exasperation in the twinkling of an eye; another mood entirely swayed him by the time he found himself gazing out into the vague, velvety dusk that momentarily was closing down upon the fairy-like panorama of terraced gardens and sullen, silken sea. His thoughts had winged back to that dear woman of whom that fragment of melody had put him in mind; and he was sighing and heavy of heart with longing for the sight of her and the touch of her hand.

of that on nothing and a glass of muddy water—risking me money as if there was no end to it, throwing it away in scandalous tips like any drunken sailor! And all for the scant satisfaction of behaving like a fool of Irishman. . . . The sickening—distracting; naught less.

I'm thinking this night ends it, though: come the morning I'll be pulling up stakes and striking out for a healthier, simpler place, where there's something afoot a man can take an interest in without losing his self-respect. I'll do just that, I will!"

This he meant firmly, and was glad of it, with a heart immeasurably lightened by the strength of his good resolution. He began to hum the old tune that the unknown woman's voice had set buzzing in his brain, and broke off to snap his fingers defiantly at the Casino. "That for ye!" he shouted it—sitting there with your painted smile and your cold eyes, like the brazen hussy ye are—Goddess of Chance, indeed!—thinking ye have but to bide your time for all men to come and render up their souls to ye! Here's once ye lose, madam; after this night I'm done with ye; not a son of mine will ever again cross your tubs. I'll have ye to understand the O'Rourke's reformed character from the morning on!"

He laughed softly, in high feather with his conceit; and, thinking cheerfully of the days of movement and change that were to follow, the song in his heart shaped itself in words upon his lips.

"I'm Paddy Whack From Ballyhackett, Not long ago turned soldier—O At grand attack, Or storm or sack, None than I will prove bolder—O"

His voice was by way of being a tenor of tolerable quality and volume, but untrained—nothing wonderful. It was just the way he trotted out the rollicking stanza that rendered it infectious, irresistible. For as he paused the voice of the woman that had reminded him of the song capped the verse neatly.

"An' when we get the route Wid a shout, How they pour! Wid a ready right-about Goes the bold soldier-boy!"

O'Rourke caught his breath, startled, stunned. "It can't be—" he whispered. For if at first her voice, subdued in distance, had stirred his memory with a touch as vague and thrilling as the caress of a woman's hand in darkness, now that he heard the full strength of that soprano, bell-clear and spirited, he was sure he knew the singer. He told himself that there could be no two women in the world with voices just like that; not another than he knew could have rendered the words with so true a spirit, so rare a brogue—tinged as that had been with the faintest, quaintest exotic inflection imaginable.

But she had stopped with the verse half sung. His pulses quickened. O'Rourke leaned forth from the window and carried it on:

"O, 'tis thin the ladies fair In despair Tear their hair! But—" "Tis divile a bit I care! Cries the bold soldier-boy!"

There fell a pause. He listened with his heart in his mouth, but heard nothing. And it seemed impossible to surmise whence, from which one of all the rooms with windows opening upon that side of the hotel, had come the voice of the woman. She might as well have been above as below him, or on either side; he could not guess. But he was determined.

Now there was beneath his window a balcony with a floor of wood and a rail of iron-filigree—a long balcony, extending from one corner of the hotel to the other. At intervals it was splashed with light from the windows of chambers still occupied by guests belated or busy, like himself, with the task of dressing for the evening. The window to his left was a light; that on his right, dark. With half his body on the balcony, his legs dangling within the room, O'Rourke watched the opening on his left with jealous, breathless expectancy. Not a sound came therefrom. He hesitated.

"If that weren't her room, I'd hear somebody moving about," he reasoned. "But, yes," he reconsidered with haste. "That lady who but this moment took the lift—her name?"

"Her name, m'sieu? Ma'm'selle Voltaire."

"Impossible!" he told himself aloud, utterly unable to forge any connecting link between the lady in the lift and her whose voice had bewitched him.

"But assuredly, m'sieu. So I not know—I who have waited upon her hand and foot these three days and to whom she has not given as much as that." The woman ticked a finger-nail against her strong white teeth. "Ma'm'selle Victo'ree Voltaire," she asserted stubbornly.

With that he took heart of hope and broke manfully into the chorus, singing directly to the lighted window, slinging the first line with ardor and fervor, with confidence and with hope, singing persuasively, pleadingly, anxiously, insistently.

"For the world is all befo'ore us—"

he sang and then paused. He heard no echo. And again he essayed, with that in his tone to melt a heart of ice:

"For the world is all befo'ore us—"

And now he triumphed and was lifted out of himself with sheer delight; for from the adjoining room came the next line:

"And landladies ado-ore us—"

Unable to contain himself, he chimed in, and in duet they sang it out to the rousing finale:

"They ne'er raynus to sco-ore us, But chalk us up wid joy We taste her tap, we tear her cap— O, that's the chap For me," cries she— "Whoo!"

"Isn't he the darlin', the bold soldier-boy?"

As the last note rang out and died, the next window was darkened; the woman had switched off the light.

He heard a faint rustle of silken ruffles. "Tis herself," he declared in an agony of anticipation—"herself and none other! And I'm thinking she'll be coming to the window now—"

He was right. Abruptly he discovered her by the reflected glow from the illumination behind him. He was conscious of the pallid oval of her face, of a sleek white sheen of arms and shoulders, of a dark mass of hair, but more than all else of the glamour of eyes that shone into his softly, like limp pools of darkness touched by dim starlight.

Inflamed, he leaned toward her. "Whist, darling!" he stammered. "Whist! 'Tis myself—tis Terence."

But she was gone. A low, stifled laugh was all his answer—that and the silken whisper of her skirts as she scurried from the window. He flushed crimson, waited an instant, then flung discretion to the winds, and found himself scrambling out upon the balcony. Heaven only knows what lengths the man would have gone had not the slam of a door brought him up standing; she had left her room!

So she thought to escape him so easily! He swore between his teeth with excitement and tumbled back whence he had come. Regardless of the fact that he was still in his shirt-sleeves he rushed madly for the door. On the way a shooting-jacket on the door, perhaps in revenge for neglect and ill-treatment, maliciously wound it.

The Enterprise says:

"The high school football team, it will be remembered, played at Hooperston Nov. 4, and the referee made a decision that gave the game to Hooperston by a score of 5 to 6. The decision in question was referred to Coach Stagg of the Chicago University and he ruled in favor of Kentland, reversing the score. The Rensselaer Republican will please note that a kick is sometimes justifiable. The only game lost by Kentland during the season was lost to Rensselaer, and this on account of heavy pen-

Kentland Still Complaining Because They Lost Game Here.

The Kentland Enterprise says: "The high school football team, it will be remembered, played at Hooperston Nov. 4, and the referee made a decision that gave the game to Hooperston by a score of 5 to 6. The decision in question was referred to Coach Stagg of the Chicago University and he ruled in favor of Kentland, reversing the score. The Rensselaer Republican will please note that a kick is sometimes justifiable. The only game lost by Kentland during the season was lost to Rensselaer, and this on account of heavy pen-

WEAK, WEARY WOMEN.

Learn the Cause of Daily Woes and End Them.

When the back aches and throbs When housework is torture When night brings no rest nor sleep When urinary disorders set in Woman's lot is a weary one. There is a way to escape these woes. Doan's Kidney Pills should be used. Have cured women here in Rensselaer.

This is one Rensselaer woman's testimony.

Mrs. Larkin Potts, Clark & Washington, St., Rensselaer, Ind., says: "I was weak and nervous and had but little strength or ambition. I rested poorly and was subject to severe headaches and pains across my loins. I could hardly attend to my housework at times and I always felt tired and worn out. Doan's Kidney Pills, procured from Fendig's Drug Store, gave me relief at once and before I had used them long all my aches and pains had disappeared. I am grateful to Doan's Kid