

HOME

A Story of Today and of All Days

By GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN

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SYNOPSIS.

Alan Wayne is sent away from Red Hill, his home, by his uncle, J. Y., as a moral failure. Clem runs after him in a tangle of short skirts to bid him good-by. Captain Wayne tells Alan of the falling of the Wayne. Clem drinks Alan's health on his birthday. Judge Healey buys a picture for Alix Lansing. The judge defends Alan in his business with his employers. Alan and Alix meet at sea, homeward bound, and start a flirtation which becomes serious. At home, Nance Sterling asks Alan to go away from Alix. Alix is taken to task by Gerry, her husband, for her conduct with Alan and defies him. Gerry, as he thinks, sees Alix and Alan eloping, drops everything, and goes to Pernambuco. Alix leaves Alan on the train.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

"That's right," said Alix as she followed him lead to a cab. She got in and then shook hands with her escort. He looked at the dollar bill her grasp left behind.

"That wasn't called for, Miss. It was enough for me to have saved ye from a fall."

"You didn't save me," said Alix with a bewildering smile. "I saved myself."

She left him scratching his head over this fresh enigma.

Alix was tired and hungry when she got back home but excitement kept her up. She felt that she stood on the threshold of new effort and a new life. After all, she thought, it was she that had made her dear old Gerry into a time-server. She could have made him into anything else if she had tried.

She longed to tell him so. Perhaps he would catch her and crush her in his arms as Alan had done. She laughed at herself for wanting him to. She rang for the butler. "Where's your master, John?"

"I don't know, ma'am. Mr. Gerry hasn't come back since he went out this morning." To John, Mr. Lansing was a person who had been dead for some time. His present overlord was Mr. and Mrs. Gerry and Mrs. Lansing when she was in town.

"Telephone to the club and if he is there tell him I want to see him," said Alix and turned to her welcome tea. The sandwiches seemed unusually small to her ravenous appetite.

Gerry was not at the club. Alix dressed resplendently for dinner. Never had she dressed for any other man with the care that she dressed for Gerry that night. But Gerry did not come. At half-past nine Alix ordered the table cleared. "I'll not dine tonight," she said to John. "When your master comes, show him in here." She sat on in the library listening for Gerry's step in the hall.

From time to time John came into the room to replenish the fire. On one of these occasions Alix told him he might go to bed but an hour later he returned and stood in the door. Alix looked very small, curled up in a great leather chair by the fire.

"It's after one o'clock, ma'am," said John. "Mr. Gerry won't be coming in tonight." Alix made no answer. John held his ground. "It's time for you to go to bed, ma'am. Shall I call the maid?"

Alix was exhausted but it was long before she fell asleep. She cried softly. She wanted to be comforted. She had dressed so beautifully—she had been so beautiful—and Gerry had not come home. As she cried, her disappointment grew into a great trouble.

She awoke early from a feverish sleep. Immediately a sense of weight assailed her. She rang and learned that Gerry had not yet come home. Then his words of yesterday suddenly came to her. "If I dropped out of the world today—" Alix stared wide-eyed at the ceiling. Why had she remembered those words? She lay for a long time thinking. Her breakfast was brought to her but she did not touch it. It was almost noon in the cloudy Sunday morning when she roused herself from apathy. She sprang from the bed. She summoned Judge Healey with a note and Mrs. Lansing with a telegram. The telegram was carefully worded. "Please come and stay for a while. Gerry is away."

The judge found Alix radiating the freshness of a beautiful woman careful of her person, but it was the freshness of a pale flower. Alix was grave and her gravity had a sweetness that made the judge's heart bound. He felt an awakening in her that he had long watched for. She told him all the story of the day before in a steady monotone that omitted nothing and gave the facts only their own weight.

When she finished the judge patted her hand. "You would make a splendid witness, my dear," he said. "Now, what you want is for me to find Gerry and bring him back, isn't it? Are you sure Gerry knew nothing of your—er—excursion to the station?"

Alix shook her head. "From the time he left my room and the house he has not been back."

"Has he been to the club?"

Alix colored faintly. "I see," said

the judge quickly. "I'll ask there. I'll go now." He went off and all that day he sought in vain for a trace of Gerry. He went to all his haunts in the city—he had telephoned to those outside. At night he returned to Alix but it was Mrs. Lansing that received him in the library.

The judge was tired and his buoyancy had deserted him. He told her of his failure. Mrs. Lansing was thoughtful but not greatly troubled. "Gerry," she said, "has a level head. He can take care of himself." She went to tell Alix that there was no news. When she came back the judge turned to her. "Well," he asked, "what did she say?"

"Nothing, except that she wanted to know if you had tried the bank."

The judge struck his fist into his left hand. "Never thought of it," he said. "That child has a head!" He went to the telephone. From the president of the bank he traced the manager, from the manager, the cashier. Yes, Gerry had been at the bank on Saturday. The cashier remembered it because Mr. Lansing had drawn a certain account in full. He would not say how much.

"There," said the judge with a sigh of relief, "that's something. It takes a steady nerve to draw a bank account in full. You must take the news upstairs. I'm off. I'll follow up the clue tomorrow."

Mrs. Lansing and Alix had never given themselves to each other. There had been no warfare between them but equally there had never been understanding. To Mrs. Lansing's inherent calm, Alix's scintillation had been repellent and Alix before Gerry's mother had felt much the same restraint as before Gerry's old butler.

There had been strength in Mrs. Lansing's calm. She had been waiting and now the waiting was over. Alix had given herself tearful and almost wordless into arms that were more than ready and had then poured out her heart in a broken tale that would have confounded any court of justice but which between women was clearer than logic.

At the end Mrs. Lansing said nothing. Instead she petted Alix, carried her off to bed and kept her there for three days. In her waking hours Alix added spasmodic bits to her confession—sage reflections after the event, dreamy "I wonders" that speculated in the past and in the measure of her emotions.

Mrs. Lansing sat and listened and sewed. Her soft brown hair just touched with gray, her calm face with its half-hidden strength, her steady eyes, turned now on Alix, now on her work, brought peace into the room and held it there in spite of the disquieting lack of news of Gerry.

When she spoke at last it was to say half-shyly, "You are stronger than I had thought. I believe every woman at the actual moment of surrender feels an impulse of shame and fear. During that moment desire lets go of her. It's the last chance that fate holds out. The women who fail to take the chance—it seems to me they fall through weakness of spirit and not of flesh."

"More women are ruined by circumstance than by desire. Women decide to burn their bridges behind them and then they think they've burned them. All the circumstances were against you. There wasn't a loophole in the net. Fate gave you your moment and you tore your way out."

On the fourth day Alix got up but on the fifth she stayed in bed. Mrs. Lansing found her pale and frightened. She had been crying.

"Alix," she whispered, kneeling beside the bed, "what is it?"

Alix told her amid sobs. "Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Lansing, throwing her arms around her, "don't cry. Don't worry. The strength will come with the need. In the end you'll be glad. So will Gerry. So will all of us."

"It isn't that," said Alix, faintly. "Oh, it isn't that. I'm just thinking and thinking how terrible it would have been if I had run away—really run away. I keep imagining how awful it would have been. It is nightmare."

"Call it nightmare if you like, sweet-heart, but just remember that you are awake."

"Yes," said Alix softly. "I am awake now. I want to watch the Hill come to life and dress up for the summer. It will amuse me. It's long since I have watched for the first buds and the first swallows. I won't mind the melting snow and the mud. It's so long since I've seen clean country mud. I want to smell it."

"You don't know how bleak the Hill can be before the spring comes," objected Mrs. Lansing.

"Will it be any bleaker with me there than when you were alone?" asked Alix.

Mrs. Lansing came over to her and kissed her. "No, dear," she said.

CHAPTER VIII

In the squalid Hotel d'Europe Gerry occupied a large room that overlooked the quay. Even if there had been a better hotel in town he would not have moved.

He was not lonely. He wandered interested through all the straggling city. When he was too lazy to go to the city he sat in the precarious balcony of his room and watched the city come to him.

Almost a month had passed since he landed on his Lethian shore, and it had served him well. The world seemed to have time-servers in small regard. He stroked over to the cable station. The offices were undergoing repairs. The ground floor was unfurnished save for a table and one chair. In the chair sat a chocolate-colored employe with a long bamboo on the floor beside him. Gerry's curiosity was aroused. He went in and wrote his message to his mother—just a few words telling her he was all right. The chocolate gentleman folded the message, slipped it into the split end of the bamboo and stuck it up through a hole in the ceiling to the floor above. Gerry smiled and then laughed at the gravity with which his smile was received. The man looked at him in astonishment. These English were all mad and discourteous. What was there to laugh at in a man at work?

Gerry went out and rambled over the city. Night came on. He was restless. He wished he had not sent the message. It was forming itself into a link. He dined badly at a restaurant and then wandered back to the quay. Arriving steamers were posted on a blackboard under a street lamp. The mail from New York was due tomorrow. The consul's papers would be full of the latest New York society scandal—his scandal. He went to his room and sat on the balcony watching the varied craft preparing to drift out on the tide. Suddenly he got up and went down to the quay.

A long, raking craft was taking on its meager provisions. Gerry engaged its captain in a pantomime parley. The boat was bound for Penedo to take on coiton. Gerry decided to go to Penedo. Two of the crew went back with him to get his baggage. The hotel was closed. Gerry was the only guest and he had his key. He had paid his weekly bill that day, so there was no need to wake up anyone. In half an hour he and his belongings were stowed on the deck of the Josephina and she was drifting slowly down to the bar.

Four days later they were off the mouth of the San Francisco. They doubled in and tacked their way up to Penedo. There was no life in Penedo. It was desolate and lonely compared with the Hotel d'Europe and the lively quay; so when a funny little stern-wheeler started up the river on its weekly trip to Piranhas, Gerry went with it.

Piranhas was a town of mud plastered against a barren cliff. It made no pretense to being alive. Here a dead man could live in peace with his surroundings. From fifteen miles up the river came the rumble of the mighty Paulo Alfonso falls, singing a perpetual requiem. Gerry established himself in a hotel of an inn that even in this far retreat did not dare call itself hotel.

The only industry in Piranhas was the washing of clothes and the women did that. Fish were caught in great quantities but fishing was not an industry. Here man fished only when he was hungry.

Gerry chartered a ponderous canoe. At first he had a man to paddle him up and down and sometimes across the wide half-mile of water. But before long he learned to handle the thing himself. The heavy work soon trimmed his splendid muscles into shape. He supplied the hostelry with a variety of fish.

One morning he awoke earlier than usual. The wave of life was running high in his veins. He sprang up and, still in his pajamas, hurried out for his morning swim. The break of day was gloriously chilly. A cool breeze, hurrying up from the sea, was steadily banking up the mist that hung over the river. Gerry sprang into his canoe and pushed off. He drove its heavy length up stream, not in the teeth of the current, for no man could do that, but skirting the shore, seizing on the help of every eddy and keeping an eye out for the green swirling mound that meant a pinnacle of rock just short of the surface. He went farther up the river than ever before. His muscles were keyed to the struggle. He passed the last jutting bend that the boatmen on the river could master and found himself in a bay protected by a spit of sand, rock-tipped and foam-tossed where it reached the river's channel. From this point the river was a chaos of jagged rocks that fought the mighty tide hurled from the falls still miles above.

Gerry ran the canoe upon the shore and stripped. He stepped on to the spit of sand. In that moment just to live was enough. A sharp cry broke on his astonished ears.

Almost at the end of the tongue of sand stood a girl. Her hair was blowing around her slim shoulders. Over one of them she gazed, startled, at Gerry. He drew back horribly confused and mumbling apologies that she could not have understood even if she could have heard them. Then she plunged with a clean long dive into the river. But before she plunged she laughed. Gerry heard the laugh. With

an answering cry he nerved himself into the water and swam as he had never swum before.

The girl had farther to go across the little bay, but she could beat Gerry swimming and she did. Only she failed to use her head and, when she found bottom, started to wade. Wading is slow work in water waist high. Gerry stuck to his long powerful stroke. As the girl reached the bank the strong fingers of his right hand closed on her bare ankle.

CHAPTER IX

Gerry's cablegram to his mother was forwarded to Red Hill on the very day that the judge had gone to tell them that no trace could be found of the missing man. The judge was more down-hearted than ever over Gerry's disappearance and when he found the two women radiating happiness and excitement his heart sank lower still.

"I haven't any good news," he said meekly before he alighted.

"Tease him," said Alix in a low tone to Mrs. Lansing.

But Mrs. Lansing had found new lines in the judge's tired face and she whispered back, "I can't." She put the cablegram in the judge's hand.

"What's this?" he said and read it. Then he gave a war-whoop, caught Alix around the waist and kissed her.

The firs were gay that night—gay with the joy of happy people happily planning. In a month, say at the most, two months, Gerry could be here. Spring would have come. The Hill would be decked out in full regalia of leaf and blossom. It would be in full commission to meet him. They looked at Alix and Alix seemed to look at herself. He would come into his own as never before.

The judge undertook the cabling. He cabled Gerry and the message was reported undelivered. Then he cabled the American consul. There followed a long series of messages; first quick and hopeful, then lagging but not doubtful, then a wearying silence of weeks, ending with the inevitable blow. Gerry had been traced to the



She Led Along the Path Through the Bush.

San Francisco river. The envoy sent on his track by the judge's orders had reached Piranhas to find the little town in apathetic wonder over the discovery of Gerry's canoe stranded three miles down the river. The paddle was still in the canoe and a suit of pyjamas had been found. His body had not been recovered. The people said it was not unusual. He had undoubtedly been attacked by tiger fish. In that case his bones would have been stripped of flesh. It was impossible to drag the great river.

The judge hid in his heart the harrowing details. To Mrs. Lansing he told the central fact. She was struck dumb with grief and then she thought of Alix. Almost hastily she decided that it was not a time to tell Alix and during long months they put her off with false news of the search. They carried it farther and farther into the wilds of the subcontinent. The country was so vast, there was no telling when the messenger would finally come up with Gerry.

Alix bore the strain with wonderful patience. The truth was that her thoughts were not on Gerry. Something greater than Gerry was claiming all her faith—all her strength of body and soul. She did not talk. She was holding that final communion with her innermost self with which a woman dedicates her body to pain and sacrifice. Alix was not afraid. In those days the spirit of the race—her race of pioneers—shone from her steady eyes and even put courage in those about her.

Only when the ordeal was over and an heir to the house of Lansing had raised his lusty voice in apparent rage at having been born to so small a kingdom, did the frail Alix of other days come back. As she lay, pale and thin, but with the glorious light of supreme achievement in her eyes, Mrs. Lansing went on her knees beside the bed and sobbed, "Oh, Alix, I love you so, I love you so!"

Alix smiled. Slowly she reached one hand over and placed it in Mrs. Lansing's. "You are crying because you are a granny now," she said, softly, playfully.

Then came the day when Alix was strong—strong enough. Mrs. Lansing told her in a choked voice what they knew and what everyone believed. She cried softly in Alix's arms.

"Poor mother!" said Alix, her lips against the wet cheek. "How strong you've been! How you hid it from me! What a burden to carry in your heart, and smile. But listen, dear mummy. You are all wrong. Perhaps I would not have known it if you had told me—then—but I know it now. Gerry is not dead. There is no river that can drown Gerry."

Alix clung to her belief. So strong was her faith that Mrs. Lansing became infected, but the judge held out against them. "My heart is with you," he said, at the end of months, "but my head won't turn. A naked man even in South America would have caused remark. Why shouldn't he have come back for his clothes, for his money? After all, he wasn't a fugitive from justice. He was a man wandering over the earth in pursuit of a mere whim and a whim doesn't last forever."

Alix interrupted him. "Judge, I have never been angry with you. We all owe you too much. But if you ever say 'was' about Gerry again—" She stopped and bit her lip but her eyes spoke for her.

"My dear girl," said the judge and only his color showed that he was hurt, "don't be angry with me. It shall be as you say. I've only been trying to save you from years of weary waiting. If you have the courage to wait for sorrow, I shall wait too."

Alix kissed him. "There," she said, "I'm sorry I was rough."

"You're rough!" laughed the judge. Then he jumped up. "I'm forgetting my duties. I have a guest of my very own at Maple House and I must go to him."

A few weeks before, Hon. Percy Collingford had looked up the judge. It was as much a pleasure to the young man as a duty he owed to his father, whose friend the judge had been for many years.

Collingford was no stranger to America but he knew far more about dodging arroyos in New Mexico on a cow pony than he did about dodging the open trenches and debris of Fifth Avenue on the trail of a tea-party. He was an Englishman, a younger son with enough money to put him above the remittance class, and he was possessed of far more intelligence than he had been born with, for, from his youth up, he had sought out experience in many places. He came back from the Klondike with more money than he needed for his passage but only a few kindred spirits knew that he had made it hammering the piano in The Fallen Star of Hope. He had the English gentleman's common creed: ride straight, shoot straight, tub often and talk the king's English. That creed fulfilled, nothing else seemed to worry him.

He was dining with the judge at the club one night when the name of Wayne—Alan Wayne—floated over occasionally from a neighboring table. Later as they sat over their coffee and cigars Collingford said abruptly, "I know a chap named Wayne."

"So?" said the judge.

"Heard those people mention Alan Wayne," explained Collingford. "I wonder if it was the same one—Ten Percent Wayne of Africa."

"That's the one," said the judge and watched Collingford's face.

"Hum," said Collingford. "When I saw Wayne he was in shirt sleeves and a battered sun helmet. There are some men that won't shake hands with him, but I'm not one of them."

It was then that the judge decided to take Collingford to Maple House for over Sunday.

Gerry Lansing was sitting alone in the shade of a bush, his knees gathered in his arms and his head bowed down. Great quivering sighs that were almost sobs were shaking his strong body. In one terrific swirl of generations, tossed him high and dropped him, broken. Between the moment when he had plunged from the sandspit and the moment when he and the girl had stood on the river bank and laughed together to see the canoe, worked adrift by the eddy, swirl out into the river and away, came had passed. In that laughing moment he had stood primeval man in a primeval world. With the drops of water from the river he had flicked off the bonds it had taken centuries to forge. And now his truant conscience returned to stand dismayed.

The girl, dressed in a homespun cotton robe belted at the waist, came back down a half-hidden path, shyly at first and then with awe to see him weeping. She tossed him a cotton jumper and trousers and then drew back and waited for him in the path. He rose slowly to his feet, dressed and followed the girl.

She led him along the path through the brush and out into a little valley made up of abandoned cane and rice bottoms. In the center was a slight elevation, too low to be called a hill, and on it was an old plantation house, white stucco once, now sady weather-streaked, its tiles green-black with the moss of years.

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