HOME

A NOVEL

By

GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN

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SYNOPSIS.

—10—

Alan Wayne is sent away from Red Hill, his home, by his uncle, J. Y., as a moral failure. Clem drinks Alan's health on his birthday. Judge Healey defends Alan in his business with his employers. Alan and Alix, Gerry's wife, meet at sea, homeward bound, and start a flirtation. At home, Gerry, as he thinks, sees Alix and Alan eloping, drops everything, and goes to Pernambuco. Alix leaves Alan on the train and goes home. Gerry leaves Pernambuco and goes to Piranhas. On a canoe trip he meets a native girl. The judge fails to trace Gerry. A baby is born to Alix. The native girl takes Gerry to the ruined plantation she is mistress of. Gerry marries her. At Maple house Collingeford tells how he met Alan—"Ten Per Cent Wayne"—building a bridge in Africa. Collingeford meets Alix and her baby and gives her encouragement about Gerry. Alan comes back to town but does not go home. Gerry begins to improve Margarita's plantation and builds an irrigating ditch. In Africa Alan reads Clem's letters and dreams of home. Gerry pastures Lieber's cattle during the drought. A baby comes to Margarita. Collingeford meets Alix in the city and finds her changed. Alan meets Alix, J. Y., and Clem, grown to beautiful womanhood, in the city and realizes that he has sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Kemp and Gerry become friends. They visit Lieber.

> If, in a day of desperate weakness you had embezzled your employer's money and had to flee the country, do you think you could resist the desire to return, even after years? Does home seem to you to be "the anchor of a man's soul?"

CHAPTER XX—Continued.

The veranda at Lieber's was like that of Fazenda Flores only much bigger. It looked out upon a wide stretch of desert but away at the rim of the desert one could feel the river. The roar of the falls mumbled in the ear. It came from so far away that one had to strain one's ears to actually define it. After supper they gathered on the veranda. They sat in rude, rawhide chairs which were comfortably strong and tilted them back to the national angle. Lieber and Gerry smoked corn-husk cigarettes but Kemp stuck to his yellow papers. Gerry did not want to talk. He sat where he could watch the strange pair whose companion he was for a night. Into the souls of Lieber and Kemp the long silences of solitude had entered and become at home. They were patient of silence. Speech had its restricted uses. They still had their hats on. Lieber's was pushed back, Kemp's was drawn forward. Kemp was whittling. Kemp's words of farewell came back to Gerry, "It's a long trail from the Alamo to New York, but the whole country's under one fence." Texan, Pennsylvania Dutchman and New Yorker might be social poles but to-night they seemed strangely near to each other.

The next morning Gerry was up early, nervous after his first night's absence from Fazenda Flores. Kemp watched him saddle his horse. "That ain't one of the five," he remarked.

"No," said Gerry. "I traded the roan for the iron-gray. Do you think I was done?"

"I ain't sayin'," said Kemp cautiously. "I don't want you should think I was teachin' you, Mr. Lansing, but that hoss ain't no iron-gray. There ain't no such color for a hoss as I ever heern tell on. That hoss is a blue an' he's a true blue."

"All right, Kemp," said Gerry, smiling. "You've named him true blue and True Blue he is from this day."

Lieber came out in pyjamas and called them for coffee. When they were seated he proposed to Kemp that he make his headquarters at the ranch for a while. The advantages were evident. It was a congregating point for the natives from miles round. Goatskins came into Lieber's from hundreds of miles up country. They came singly, in donkey loads or in whole packtrains. Sometimes they passed directly into his hands from the producer; sometimes they ran through a chain of transfers, from hand to hand. All news centered at and radiated from Lieber's. The same men that brought in goatskins would be glad to add orchids to their stock in trade.

Kemp grunted his thanks. He had waited two years for this offer. The realization of the obligation Lieber was putting him under embarrassed him. He began to talk. "These greasers," he said, "take a lot o' teachin' sometimes, an' sometimes they don't. F'r instance, you can tell 'em that Cattleyas are wo'th money and that the rest o' their parasites ain't, 'nd after they seen you throw Bu'lin'tonias an' Oncidiums an' Miltonias into the discard fo' three months steady, they begin to sober down to jest Cattleyas 'nd realize that it's no use holdin' a fourflush against a workin' pair."

At the scientific names dropping so incongruously from Kemp's lips, Gerry stopped eating and looked up. Lieber's face wore the smile of one who had heard it before but is quite willing to hear it all over again.

"But," continued Kemp, "yo' c'n pull till you're blin' an' you can't head 'em around to see that onless a Cattleya has eight leaves, it's too young to be packed an' no good to the market besides bein' a victim to race suicide.

"As to their bringin' in Bu'lin'tonias an' Oncidiums an' Miltonias, I never get onpatient o' that. How c'n a greaser ever learn that a Miltonia Spectabilis Moreliana that looks like pigeon's blood in a pu'ple shadow ain't a commercial proposition, while the Cattleyas is? When he's in the woods an' a smell straight f'm heaven draps its rope on him an' he looks up an' sees a droopin' spike o' snow, how you goin' to teach him that a Bu'lin'tonia Fragrans ain't just as good business as a Labiata?

"Time was when orchids was an ambition; now they's jest a business. In Eurup, it's some different. They's collectors hankerin' after new varieties an' houses that keeps men lookin' for 'em but in America, you ma'k me, if an orchid don't make up well on the missus' bodice or on the table, it ain't business; an' they's a few million children growin' up to the idea that if it ain't a Cattleya it ain't an orchid."

Kemp came to himself, blushed and hurried out as if on urgent business. Lieber looked at Gerry's thoughtful face and smiled. "Who'd have thought he'd ever talk that way in daylight?" he said.

"I think," replied Gerry, "it was your offering to let him make this place his headquarters. It rattled him and started him off. I could see he was grateful."

"Perhaps that was it," said Lieber. "He's a queer one. He never asked me. It just occurred to me to suggest it because I'm getting to enjoy having Kemp around."

Gerry nodded. His eyes fell on the clock and he got up with a start. The sun was at its highest when he reached Fazenda Flores. "Thou hast been away a long time," said Margarita reproachfully.

Gerry jumped off his horse and kissed her. Then he picked up his son and set him in the saddle. Margarita screamed. True Blue arched his neck and looked cautiously around at his featherweight burden. The young horse stood very still while Margarita fought past Gerry's arm and dragged the Man from its perilous perch to her bosom. And manlike the Man protested with a bad-tempered, whole-lunged wail that rent the air and brought Dona Maria to the corner of the house to peer at them with eyes shaded under cupped hands.

A few days later the rains came in earnest, passed and Gerry contracted with Lieber for labor to be paid for in produce. Fazenda Flores blossomed and bore fruit. People began to come in from afar to barter for produce and a buyer appeared and took over the whole of the little cotton crop. Gerry poured money into Margarita's lap—more money than she had ever seen—and sent her under escort of Dona Maria and Bonifacio and the Man to purchase all of comfort and furbelows that the tiny market of Piranhas could supply.

They were to be gone two days and Gerry left the Fazenda in charge of his foreman to go and spend the time with Lieber and Kemp. He found Kemp in a sort of controlled elation over the greatest shipment of commercial orchids the trade had ever known. Just after Gerry's arrival two men appeared bearing a monster plant of over two hundred leaves strung, like the grape cluster of Eschol, on a pole. Kemp's deep-set eyes seemed to grow out of his head as he made out their burden. "Hi-yi!" he yelled and rushed off to the corral where he threw himself on to an astonished heifer. For one second she squatted and then went mad. With yell and flogging hat Kemp poured oil on the fire of her frenzy. She bucked and twisted and all but somersaulted in her efforts to rid herself of the demon on her back. On the veranda, Lieber and Gerry held their sides and roared at the most grotesque fine riding they had ever seen. Finally, with a desperate lunge, the heifer breasted the corral fence. It caught her middle and she teetered over. Kemp turned a handspring from her back and landed on his feet. The heifer scrambled free from the fence and tore, wild-eyed, out into the desert. Laughter rang from every side. Three herders threw themselves on to their horses and rode, shouting, after the heifer. Kemp straightened out his hat, put it on, and walked sedately over to the veranda. There was only a faint glint in his eye as he bought the monster plant to crown the monster shipment.

Chapter XXI

That dry season saw the beginning of a drought that will long hold the blackest page in the annals of the San Francisco basin. It seemed but days after the rains when the sparse grass and new-leafed bushes of the wilderness began to shrivel up. Day after day the sun leaped brazen, from the horizon to the sky, his first level rays searching out the scant, stored moisture of wilting foliage, and the very sap of the hardy brush. While the cattle were still fat they became weak and turned to cactus for nourishment. They broke down the sickly branches with their horns and rubbed them in the sand to free them of the worst of the thorns. Herders rode the rounds on weakening horses and dismounted time and again to pull out spines from the snouts of passive, panting cows. Bulls died of broken pride. They would not subject themselves to the pain of eating cactus. The river—the great river—was no longer great. It grumbled with a weak voice from deep down in the gorge. Gerry watched its falling level with anxious eye and one day sent an urgent call to Lieber for help.

Lieber came. He brought with him an army, every man bearing with him the tool that had come soonest to his hand. Spades were few and hoes; the bright shares of a pick or two caught the light like lances. Most of the men depended on the heavy sheath knives they carried at their sides. They looked like an army of sansculottes as they swarmed into the ditch and began to dig. In two days they had sunk it to the required level. When they finished Gerry rode back with them to help bring down Lieber's weakening stock.

Kemp had stayed in sole possession at Lieber's. Digging was not in his line, so he had volunteered to hold the fort against the return of the garrison. He welcomed Lieber and Gerry to a supper of his own making in approved cowboy style: sour-dough biscuits made by a master hand, steaks cut from a freshly killed calf and fried before toughness set in, a pile of creamy mashed spuds. There was a homeliness about the meal that made them eat in silence. They felt as though for years they had been worshiping false culinary gods. The pile of steaks, the heaped potatoes, the hot biscuit, were exotics, strayed into a land of pepper sauces and garlic.

The silence on the veranda that night was even longer than usual. Gerry's mind went back to a French book that he had bought in desperation at Pernambuco. He had ploughed through half of it and with a catch in his thoughts he remembered that it lay open on the table when he left his little room in Piranhas on the morning of mornings that had broken life in two. Some of its phrases, conned over and over again in his struggle with the half-forgotten idiom, came back to him. "La parole est du temps, le silence de l'eternite." He smiled to himself at the twisted meaning the long silence of his companions gave to the words.

Then the smile left his face. He remembered the argument. The instinct we all have for superhuman truths tells us that it is dangerous to be silent with those we would keep at a distance, for words pass and are forgotten between men, but silence—active silence—is forever ineffaceable. True life—the moments of life that leave a trace—is made up of silence. Not passive silence; that is but another name for sleep. But the active silence that breaks down barriers, pierces walls and turns the life of every day into a life where all is intense, where there is no ban—nothing forbidden—where laughter dare not enter, where subjection is submerged and where all—all, is remembered.

Gerry felt that this active silence had come upon them. These men were being borne into the silent sphere of his own soul. He felt restless—afraid. He decided to speak. He was on the point of speaking when Lieber let down his chair softly, clasped his hands and broke the silence.

"Last night I dreamed I heard the blast of a steamer's horn and when I woke up the cold sweat was on my forehead because I know that there is no desert, no wilderness, so far from the things you would forget that dreams cannot follow you to it."

He stopped and silence fell upon them again. Lieber stared straight in front of him, out into the night. His face worked as though he were struggling to keep his lips closed. When he began to speak again, the words were scarcely audible. "I don't know why I want to tell you two about why I am here, unless it is that as we sat here so quiet I felt that you knew it all—that you knew all that I know and that I was on the point of knowing all that you have known. The little lies of life suddenly became big and hateful and I saw in my life a monster lie that the silence was exposing.

"There are lots of men with the beginning of my story. It's common and takes little telling. I was born in Pennsylvania. We were mighty poor farmers but I got all the schooling there was within walking distance of home. My old man saw to that. When I was still a boy our little bank took me in. It wasn't doing much business then but a couple of years later the region struck oil and the bank's business soared by leaps and bounds. It turned into as good a spouter as any of the wells. The family that ran it became rich and went to higher jobs or out altogether. The staff was shoved up and about the time I was of age I was handling more money than I'd ever known was in the world. The amount I stole was an even thirty thousand and I got away with it. It was easier to do thirty years ago than it is today. I got away with it and then it got away with me. It lasted me a year and four months and I saw the end of it up the coast at Pernambuco.

"I date my birth from the day I spent the last dollar and woke up. I worked. Nothing was too small or too big for me to handle. I got something to risk and then I risked it. I risked it again and again. After ten years I could draw my check for thirty thousand plus interest and I did. I sent the check to the little bank back home. I waited two months for the answer and then it came; my check torn across and a short letter saying that the loss had already been met by a bankers' surety association. I wrote the association a dozen letters and some of them took some writing. In the last I offered fourfold the theft. There had been plenty of Bible in my bringing-up. They wrote back that it was no use—that I could keep on climbing in peace but it was their business to jail me for fifteen years the first chance they got and they'd do it the minute I set foot where they could grab me.

"That letter frightened me. I began to realize that what I'd been working for wasn't money, or honor, or rehabilitation but just the right to go back—the right to go back home.

"Nobody had been harder on me than my old man. For years nobody in the house was allowed to say my name and if he saw a letter from me he threw it in the fire, opened or unopened. But somehow it got to him that I had offered to pay fourfold and that I'd been refused and that turned him. It was the fourfold that did it—the divine and sacred measure of justice. He started to fight for me as hard as he'd ever fought against. And then he died and my old mother died. Letters stopped. My brothers and sisters were coming up in the world. They couldn't afford to own a thief much less fight for him. So the letters stopped.

"I spent money then. I built me a house in Pernambuco that was a wonder palace and I started in to forget. But when you've been remembering with all your might, the color of the paper on the walls of home, the lay of the wood-pile, of the sheds and the tumbling barn and stables, the holes in the fence, the friendly limbs of apple trees and the smell of hay; when you've been coddling bare memories of simple things like those for fifteen years, you can't turn around on your inside self and forget.

"There's a flag the sight of which makes my heart come up into my throat and tears to my eyes. You

"Thou Hast Been Away a Long Time."

think I mean the Stars and Stripes, but I don't. I mean the Blue Peter that flies at the halyards of big ships and says to everybody that takes the trouble to look, 'We sail today.' Over the tops of the houses I've seen that flag blinking in the heavens like a bit of deep blue sea married to a white cloud and to me it always said, 'We sail for home today.' I'd shut my eyes or close the blinds but what was the use of that? Night and day I could hear the bellow of the great horns—a blast for good-by and another for a challenge to the sea—as the big boats headed out for home.

"I couldn't stand it. I came up here. And now, last night, I dreamed that I heard it in my sleep—up here. Gentlemen, a man without a country is in a bad way but a man without a home, even if it's a hovel—well—we all know the old song." He paused to master his voice. Then in a whisper that they just caught he added, "Home is the anchor of a man's soul. I want to go Home."

Lieber stopped talking. The revealing silence had done its work. It had brought them close—so close that he had spoken lest they take his soul by assault. He left them and went to his own room. They saw he was an old man, beyond the years he had disclosed.

They did not speak. They were nervous. Kemp made a cigarette, puffed at it once or twice and then threw it away, to roll another a moment later. His thoughts were winging away to the fork of Big and Little Creek where a three-room shack stood in the shadow of the White mountains of New Mexico. He had thought it small, miserable, cramped. But out here in the wilderness, thousands and thousands of miles away, it seemed to his vision, glorified. A swelling came into his throat. He tried to cough it up. But as long as he thought of the mountain, the thickness stuck in his throat. He took from his pocket a treasured cake of tobacco and with strong teeth tore off a generous portion. Then he rose and walked off to the corral.

Gerry sat on alone. Thoughts were troubling him, too. What was he doing here? Who was this Margarita that had twined herself into his life? Was it his life? And her little boy—black-haired, black-eyed, olive-tinted—he was his boy, too. He was Gerry Lansing's son. No, not that—not Gerry Lansing's. Gerry Lansing belonged to a time that was far away, to a hill where white houses with green blinds peered out from the darkness of domed maples, from the long shadows of up-pointing firs and from the eaves of flaring elms, the wine-cups of heaven. A sigh came quivering through all his body and escaped from his trembling lips. "I am alone," he breathed to himself.

CHAPTER XXII

Deep in South America, on the ragged fringe of the outskirts of progress, Alan Wayne was pushing a long bridge across a dried-up watercourse. He was sick, tired, disgusted. Over and over again he had grumbled to McDougal that it was a job for a mason and McDougal had patiently answered, "I'm the mason, Mr. Wayne. Do you lie bye a wee and gie the fever a chance to get out of the body." But Alan stuck jealously to his job. Ten Percent Wayne might retire on his laurels but he could never be beaten.

Every third day the fever in his bones seized his body in a grip that could not be denied, shook it till it rattled and cast it down limp, cold and hot, teeth chattering and then clenched, and then chattering again. But on the days between Alan made up for the lapse. He became a devil hanging on the backs of his men and driving them to superhuman efforts. Terror held them. They were Italians, far from home. A wilderness stretched between them and the sea. The sea itself was none of theirs; it was but an added barrier. A madman had them in thrall. Terror drove them. It was a race to finish the bridge before he killed them. "I am going to be sick," he had told them in cold, rapid words, "I am going to be sick, but before I'm finished the bridge is finished or—" He smiled and made a gesture with his hand to show how he would brush them all off into the dry gorge. His smile terrified more than the raised hand.

The giant gang-boss, McDougal, stood by and nodded solemn confirmation. When Alan was ill by day, McDougal left him and drove the men in his stead, but when the hour for knocking off came with the sudden eclipse of the sun by the horizon, he hurried to Alan's hut, dished him out from some corner on the floor, wrapped him in blankets, dosed him with quinine, tempted him with poor, weak broths and nursed him, unprotesting, through the night.

McDougal had followed Alan into strange lands and strange places and seen him in many a deep hole, and through it all Alan had been the same—a purring dynamo at work. He had been the same until this trip into the Brazilian wilderness, and here a change had come over him. There were times when he talked and what he said was, "No more trips for me, McDougal. I'm a consulting engineer from this on." McDougal had heard more than one man talk like that under fever and he frowned, trying to remember one of them that had ever come back.

Alan was inured to river fever. He had fought it often, and when he saw the fetid pools of stagnant water in the dried-up watercourse he knew he would have to fight it again. Somehow, some night, a mosquito was bound to get at him, and the fever would begin. He doubled his preventive dose of quinine, but he could not double his spirits for the battle. He came to the field with a gnawing at those sources of health, a calm mind and sure sleep. Sleep did not come as of old after the day's work. Instead he tossed and twisted on his narrow cot and finally would turn on the electric torch to read two letters over and over again.

One he read with a curl of the lip. It was from a pretty woman that had fluttered into his life and out. He had forgotten her and now she had come back to buzz words in his buzzing ears. She said, "It costs a woman to learn that happiness is not really tangible. Between being fortunate and happy a gulf is fixed. I was fortunate—just not miserable—and stood on the brink of the gulf. Happiness brushed me with its wings. I reached out to catch it and the gulf took me. How long will it be before I climb back to the height that seemed not so very high when I possessed it? I don't know . . . I do not hate you—only myself. You have known many women, but you have not known me. Take the bitter part. You do not know what I gave you. One thing I ask you and the words as I write are blurred with tears like my eyes—if ever a foolish woman, honest and true as I was, offers you the same sacrifice, do not take it. I have suffered for all the women you will meet."

"Fool," said Alan to himself, "fool, not to see that I turned her wishy-washy weakness into strength and loosed a dumb tongue."

> What sort of a reply do you suppose the cynic Alan wrote to this sorrowing woman? What does he deserve for his angering attitude?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

ATTORNEYS.

D. F. FORTNEY, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW, BELLEFONTE, PA. Office North of Court House.

W. HARRISON WALKER, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW, BELLEFONTE, PA. No. 19 W. High Street. All professional business promptly attended to.

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