HOME

A Story of Today and of All Days

By

GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN

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SYNOPSIS.

—11—

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, and the three exiles are drawn together by a common tie. Lieber tells his story. In South America Alan gets the fever.

There's a lot of maudlin sentiment about "dear old mother" put into cheap songs and sung by scalawags, but just the same, "God" and "Mother" are the two biggest words in the English language. Consider here the effect of a mother's memory on Alan Wayne.

CHAPTER XXII—Continued.

And then he drew out the other letter and the curl in his lip straightened out to a line of sweetness and the light in his eyes turned to a fiery, blind adoration. The letter had been sent to him, sealed, by J. Y., who had accompanied it with a note. The letter began, "To my boy at Thirty," and signed, "With undying love, your friend and Mother." In life he could not remember his mother, but he saw her now in three pages of laboring words traced by a dying hand. In herself, dying at thirty, she had seen her boy revealed. She had had no strength—no time—left for slow approaches. With the first words of her letter she laid a cooling hand on his burning soul. She spoke the all-seeing wisdom of death. She held him close to her heart and fed him with her life's blood. All that she had been, all that she had learned, all that she foresaw, was crowded into those three pages. They were brittle with age, the ink yellow and faded in words that no eyes but his and hers had ever seen. They gripped his soul and held it steady. Without this letter he would have torn up the other. But the other had come as a complement and he kept it because it helped him to see himself.

As Alan weakened the bridge approached completion. Batches of men, as special work was finished, were dispatched to the coast. With each batch McDougal strove to send his master, but Alan was too weak to go, though he did not say so. He had realized it with terror and then with calm. "No, McDougal, not this time," he would say, and finally, "I think I might just as well stay on till they send up to take over. It's unprofessional to chuck it before. It won't be long now." And McDougal had cursed low, rolling oaths and taken it out on the men.

Alan seemed to have become childish in his weakness. He spent what strength he had left in cutting words into a board ripped from a kerosene box. When he had finished he called McDougal and showed him his handiwork. "McDougal," he said, "if anything should happen to keep me here permanently just cut these words into some big rock and lay me under it. Be careful you get them just so. The French are mighty particular about the way we use their lingo, and while it wasn't a Frenchman that wrote this bit, I guess he'd be just as particular."

"Aweel, sir," said McDougal, stifling his rage within him, "I'll do as you wish." He took the board and looked at it. The words meant nothing to him but the scene meant much. He went out and concluded his agreement with twelve quiet, lowering men gathered from the countryside. They were pioneers without knowing it. They and their fathers and their fathers' fathers had held these far depths of the world against wild beasts and drought and flood since, centuries ago, the Jesuits swept through the subcontinent and left a trail of settlers behind them. They were proud, narrow, independent. They were uninventive, unimaginative. No man among them had ever thought to lie. They did not steal, though they were robbed whenever they invaded civilization with their wares.

From them McDougal had learned that due east, halfway to the sea, was a place called Lieber's and that this Lieber was known as the Americano and had fame as a curador of fevers. Four men could carry a sick man to Lieber's in a hammock in four days. Twelve men could do it in two, and quicker than that a hundred men could not go. For the price of three steers each—two-year-olds—they would undertake to deliver the sick man at Lieber's in two days. McDougal pondered. It was a chance. If he sent Alan to the rail-head there wouldn't be even a chance. There was no one who could help at the rail-head, nor along the thin line, nor even at the coast.

"In two days," said he despairingly, "the master will be dead."

They gathered at the door of Alan's tent and looked in at him as he lay half comatose. "No," said the oldest of them, "he will be dead in seven days' time."

As McDougal picked him up and laid him gently in a hammock, Alan came to. The hammock was padded with pillows and blankets and strung on a stout bamboo pole with two men at each end supporting it.

"What are you doing with me?" he asked angrily and sank back into the pillows. From there his eyes glared up at McDougal.

"I'm sending ye home," said McDougal gently but firmly.

Alan smiled a twisted smile. "Sending me home," he repeated, and added resignedly, "Oh, all right." Then he started up. "Bring matches," he said. McDougal took matches from his pocket. Alan drew two letters from inside his coat. "Burn them." He held them out and watched jealously as McDougal opened out the sheets with averted eyes and set fire to the thin paper. The filmy cinders blew hither and thither under the light breeze. The men under the pole moved nervously, anxious to be off. Their eight companions wheeled their flea-bitten ponies and headed for the trail. "No, you don't," shouted McDougal and explained with many gestures that they were to ride behind on account of the dust.

"We know, master," answered one quietly, "we would but start."

McDougal held out an awkward hand in farewell. "You're ready, Mr. Wayne?"

"Yes," said Alan between chattering teeth, and then cried, "No, I want the board—my epitaph thing, you know."

McDougal dived into the tent and brought out the board with the roughly cut words that he could not read but somehow began to understand. He slipped it into the hammock behind the cushions and then just touched Alan's hand and gave the word to the men. They started off in a shambling, rapid trot. The horseman fell in behind. A cloud of dust cut them off from McDougal's gaze. He turned and fell upon his laboring squad with a rolling flood of curses. To them the words were Greek, but nevertheless their blood curdled and they worked as only Wayne had taught them.

Chapter XXIII

Lieber, with Gerry and Kemp, sat in the shade of the veranda, smoking after the midday meal. The stock had been corralled, but, on Kemp's advice, the start for Fazenda Flores was to be made half-way through the afternoon. There was to be a great moon that night and the drive would be robbed of the perils of darkness to cattle as well as of the horrible heat.

The three were silent, half somnolent, when a passing herder grunted and pointed westward with his chin. Lieber stood up and looked. A pillar of dust was coming across the desert. He could see men riding and something else. He took his field glasses from a peg and looked again. "Funeral, or a sick man," he said and sat down to wait. Kemp started whittling to keep himself awake. Since the hour of Lieber's confession he had hardly spoken.

When the cavalcade came within easy view Gerry stood up and watched. He could not hide his curiosity like Lieber and Kemp. In front of the horses came four men bearing a sagging hammock on a pole. They were running in quick, springy steps that made the hammock sway gently from side to side. The pace they kept up under the burden was marvelous. They were followed closely by eight horsemen. At the first signs of faltering among the bearers, four of the riders would throw themselves off their ponies and run under the pole. The change of relay was made without a stop, without a pause. The freed ponies stood with hanging heads and straddled legs. Even from a distance one could see that the burdened men had run the wiry little beasts off their feet. They were all in, but the men were still erect—keen. With a final spurt the cortege drew up before the veranda. Lieber stood up. "Dead or dying?" he asked.

"Master, we do not know," answered the oldest of the men, their leader.

"Fever or smallpox?" asked Lieber.

"Fever."

With a look of relief Lieber went down the steps to the hammock. A sheet had been thrown over the pole to keep off the worst of the sun. He pulled it off. A ghastly sight met his eyes, but he did not shrink. "Bring him up here," he said, springing up the steps and sweeping a saddle harness and some old magazines off a great rawhide settle on the veranda.

They laid the sick man on the settle and Lieber started to strip him with gentle, deft hands. Kemp strode forward and helped but Gerry stood by, powerless to move. He had recognized Alan, the man he had sworn to break if ever he met him. Somebody else had broken Alan, terribly, pitilessly. Gerry's eyes shrank from the sight. A lump came into his throat. Alan was dead. Alan with whom he had wandered barefoot through those quiet lanes of home, with whom he had fished and swum, and once had fought. What a little fury Alan had been in that boys' battle! It had not been fought to a finish. On one impulse they had stopped and looked at each other and turned away, ashamed to shake hands.

Lieber, once heavy, florid and clumsy, was transformed. He worked quickly, with sure hands. The body lay stripped on the settle. Under it still lay the hammock and dusty blankets. The pillows and a board had been tossed on the floor. Lieber examined his patient minutely, without haste. The spleen was frightfully distended and pushed out across the abdomen. He could feel its hard, unyielding margins. The feet were swollen. The face was yellow with the sickly gray-yellow of molded straw. Coma had set in.

Lieber dragged a great medicine chest out from his room. With alcohol he rapidly washed out the dust-filled nostrils of the stricken man and bathed his face and then the limbs and body. Then he took out a hypodermic

"In Two Days," Said He, "the Master Will Be Dead."

syringe and a graduated glass. In the glass he dissolved a powder and with steady hands added measured drops of a liquid of faint amber hue.

Gerry found his tongue. "What is it?" he asked.

"Quinine and arsenic," said Lieber shortly.

"Arsenic? Isn't that dangerous?" said Gerry.

Lieber glanced at him. "It will probably kill him."

"Then why—why—" protested Gerry. A great desire to protect what was left of Alan had come over him.

"Why?" said Lieber dryly, "I'll tell you, Mr. Lansing. Because it is less cowardly to kill a man than to let him die."

He mixed the solution in the syringe and then, grasping Alan's arm, he pressed it until the veins came out in swelling network. "Hold his arm like that," he commanded Kemp. Kemp clutched the arm. The bones seemed to bend to the grip. Lieber chose a swollen vein and pierced it with the needle. He forced the dose into the blood. "There," he said with a smile to Gerry, "that's what's known as an intravenous administration of quinine and arsenic. If another paroxysm hits him he's done for, but we'll know all about that in forty-eight hours' time."

He went into the house and brought out clean sheets, soft woolen blankets, pillows and pillow-slips. Kemp had never seen such linen; Gerry had almost forgotten the feel of it. Gerry came to life. With one hand under Alan's shoulder and another under his hips, he lifted him as though he were an empty shell, while Kemp and Lieber drew out the dust-caked blankets and hammock and spread first a cane mat over the settle and then a blanket and, on top of that, a sheet. The touch of Alan's dry, crackling skin seemed to Gerry to be burning his hands. "It is as though there were fire in him," he said to Lieber.

Lieber looked at his patient with an all-seeing eye. He paused before covering him up. "That's it," he said. "There's fire in him—the worst kind—and he's been playing with it, just tickling it with stale quinine." His eye ran rapidly over the thin body. "I said the dose I gave him would probably kill him, but I've changed my mind. I'm betting the other way, now I really look at him. There's no flesh on him, but he doesn't look like a skeleton. Why? Because of the sinews and bones of him—they're perfect. Look at the way the sinews hold his neck and the way the neck carries the sinews. Look at the flat bulge of his ribs and the breadth of his shoulders over the hips. That means heart and lungs and vitals. That man's been a fighter, and unless I'm a bigger fool than I was yesterday he's a fighter yet."

"Cover him up, for God's sake," said Gerry.

Lieber dropped the sheet and went off to the kitchen. Gerry and Kemp covered the stripped body and tucked many blankets over it. Lieber came back and took off half the blankets. "Mustn't tire him with weight," he explained. "If he's going to sweat, he'll sweat all right. Malaria—malignant fever—is the tiredest disease in the world. When they get too tired to breathe, that's the end." He took hold of Alan's wrist. "To feel his pulse, you'd say he was dead now."

"'Bout time we was startin'," remarked Kemp with his eyes toward the declining sun.

Gerry's first impulse was to say he would stay, but he suddenly remembered Margarita. How far away from life she seemed! Alan and Margarita could not crowd into one day or even into one world—it was against the order of things. But facts do not stand on the order of their coming, they simply come, and against the protest of man's will they present his fate; against the cry of the troubled and displaced soul they voice the eternal j'y suis, j'y reste of inanimate things. One cannot go around a fact. One must either break one's head against it or swallow it and let it take its course through the mental gorge.

Gerry longed to stay by Alan's side, and through his returning consciousness, as through a magnifying glass, gaze upon the world he had forsworn—the heritage he had abandoned. But the fact of Margarita and her boy suddenly declared itself—demanded digestion—and Gerry turned his back on Alan. He mounted, and with the silent Kemp reversed the drive they had made together months before.

Lieber did not go with them. When he had seen them off, he busied himself giving orders for the tidying up of the veranda, the feeding of Alan's convoy, beast and man, and the preparation of a room for the self-invited guest. From the pile of dusty pillows a servant was picking up, fell a board. Lieber glanced down at it. Words were cut roughly but clearly into its surface. They spoke to him. They held his eyes. He stooped laboriously

Somebody Else Had Broken Alan.

and picked up the board. He took it into his private room, propped it up against some books on the table and sat before it with his face dropped in his hands. To his closed eyes the words seemed no longer carved in wood. Against the inward darkness of his brain they shone out in points of light. He could not shut them out. "Qui de nous n'a pas eu sa terre promise, son jour d'extase, et sa fin en exil?"

At sundown Lieber came out to his patient. He had him moved, settle and all, into a room whose windows opened upon the veranda. Lieber sat beside him and nursed him through the long, hot night. To the deftness of his hand had been added tenderness, and into his face a new determination had come—a resolve to win Alan's battle for him whatever the odds.

Gerry did not sleep that night. He lay on the little extra bed he had made upon his son's arrival and, propping himself on his elbow, gazed around him. The moon shone through great cracks in the warped shutters and filled the room with a glow that, as his eyes dilated, became a revealing light. In one corner was an iron wash-stand with its vessels of coarse enameled metal, a recent purchase. In another corner stood a grotesque clothes-rack. It looked like a young pine with irregular branches and top lopped off. On the stubs or pegs hung his clothes and Margarita's and, on the lowest peg of all, the Lilliputian garments of the Man. The floor was bare and rolling, for the boards, roughhewn from hardwood giants of the forest, had warped steadily through many years. In its center stood the great rustic bed that Gerry had made from the twisted limbs of trees and Bonifacio had plaited with thongs. By raising himself to the full length of his arm Gerry could see Margarita lying uncovered on the coarse, yellowish homespun. On her bare, brown arm lay the black head of her son.

Gerry shuddered at the nearness—the familiarity—of everything. The seams of elementary life stood out brutally. For the first time he saw them. From the touch of the coarse homespun his mind went back to the feel of Lieber's fine linen, and from that it poised on Alan and then flew back to Alix—Alix, who, seen through the years, became doubly ethereal and flowerlike. What had Alan done with her? He must ask him. That, at least, he must know. But before he could ask he must decide about Margarita and steel himself to his purpose. He thought of the long, still days at Fazenda Flores before Alan had come to Lieber's—the struggle and the reward that had been his—and the firmness in him, the steadfastness that had led Alan to name him The Rock, rose up in defense of Margarita and her son.

Gerry was up early. As he was saddling True Blue Margarita came on to the veranda. "Where art thou going?" she asked.

Gerry looked up. He was a little pale from the wakeful night and there were slight shadows under his eyes. "I am going to Lieber's. There is a sick man there—he is dying and I must help. He is my fellow-countryman."

Margarita's eyes searched his face. Her bosom rose and fell rapidly. "Do not go," she said, and Gerry started at the passion in her voice.

He looked at her and smiled. "I must see this man before he dies," he said half to himself.

"Ah," said Margarita, beating with her little brown fist on the veranda pillar, "I know. I know. It is not death that calls thee. Why should one turn from things that live to fondle death? It is the stranger thou wouldst see."

Gerry dropped the reins of his horse, and, hurrying up the steps, took Margarita in his arms.

"And why not, my beloved? It is not a woman I go to see, but a man. Shall I not talk with a man that is at death's door?"

"Let him but die," pleaded Margarita; "let him but die and thou shalt go and bury him. See, the day is beautiful. There is a cloud. Perhaps it will rain. Come, my Geree, let us go down to the river and swim. We will take the Man. He shall sit on the bank and the river will play with his bare toes. He will laugh."

Gerry smiled but shook his head. "Tomorrow, my beloved, tomorrow we shall play with the Man and the river."

Margarita's arms fell to her sides in pathetic surrender. She watched Gerry mount and ride slowly up the slope to the bridge where Kemp awaited him. Then she went back to the veranda steps, sat down and wept with her face hidden in her hand. She did not know why she wept, but she knew she wept for things that were going to be.

CHAPTER XXIV

Alan was struggling back from coma. He muttered, he talked, he awoke. Lieber found his sunken eyes, the pupils appearing almost concave, fixed on him with a seeing gaze. It was like resurrection. A spirit had come down upon the body. Eye to eye, mouth to mouth, heart to heart, it had given sight, breath, life.

The eyes closed. Lieber hurried away. From the kitchen he brought a bowl of broth. It was steaming and filled the room with an odor of rich essence. It was in itself a concentration of life. The bowl was emptied. Alan sank back into the pillows. His eyes wandered wistfully over the bare walls, the high tiling of the strange room. "I would have, great gods! but one short hour of native air—let me die at home," he murmured, and Lieber heard.

The words clutched at his own heart, but he answered cheerfully, "You shall, my boy, you shall die at home if you like, but you're going to have years to think it over. Sleep, that's the word. And sleep it is," he added to himself as Alan's eyes closed and his chest began to rise and fall in healthy breathing. Lieber held his wrist. The pulse was taking on strength.

Alan was still sleeping when Gerry arrived. Lieber looked up, surprised. "You've come all the way back from Fazenda Flores?"

Gerry nodded. "How is he? Has he come to, yet?"

"Yes," said Lieber in a low, modulated tone. "He came to, all right. But the fight's not over yet. Fever goes and comes, you know. If another paroxysm seizes him, he'll not have the strength to pull through. It's a question of hours now."

If you had the opportunity to put out of the way forever the man who you thought had wrecked your home and life, would you do it, especially if your purpose could be accomplished simply by a little neglect in giving a fever patient his medicine on time?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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