

MYSTERY OF DEADMAN'S FLAT

A ROMANTIC STORY OF THE FAR WEST.

By the Author of "Love or a Lie," "Winning Her Inheritance," Etc.

She greeted him with a smile, which, while it made him the envy of all the other men standing round, caused him to wonder for a few moments whether he were on his head or his heels. The group of volunteers drew off discreetly, seeing that the two young people were already known to each other, and they gathered round the driver instead, who was being hospitably treated by the proprietor of the "Red Unicorn."

"Any news?" asked the driver, handing back the battered power tankard.

The question was followed by a short silence, as it was one that required some mental exertion to answer.

"Tom Cairnes is gone," said one of the miners at last, taking his pipe out of his mouth to give this brief reply.

"Buried him away over there, this afternoon," said another, with his eyes fixed solemnly on the men rubbing down the horses.

The driver stared from one of the speakers to the other, and then all round the group of men about him. He met their gaze with stolid solemnity, one or two giving a curt nod to confirm the information.

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CHAPTER V.

The Hon. Jack Newenham, after a railway journey of nearly three days, which scorched him and dusted by day and stifling air at night made the most wearisome of thoughts, had, after traveling, arrived at Vennelville, the town where he was to take the stage coach for Deadman's Flat, about two hours after it had started on its weekly journey to that place. The prospect of spending a week at Vennelville, apart from the delay in fulfilling the object of his journey, was too intolerable to be entertained for a moment. Further progress, however, seemed difficult until he fell in with a party of men who were traveling in search of "luck," and then he found the journey as pleasant as he had anticipated. The out door life, the frank cordiality of his companions—who, while they tacitly owned him their superior in birth and education, yet treated him with the modest independence of their class—made the time pass most enjoyably, and he felt quite sorry, when he parted from them some miles east of Deadman's Flat, to push on alone, they making their way farther south.

He entered Deadman's Flat about sunset, when there was apparently considerable excitement prevailing in the long, straggling "High" street. Red shirted miners were lounging or strolling about; gaudily dressed or slatternly women were shrilly discussing some event at the saloon doors, while the children were scampering to and fro, getting into everybody's way. The excitement was so great that even Jack Newenham did not arouse much curiosity as he passed up the street. After inquiring of a man standing at the door of his store, he made his way towards the "Red Unicorn," as being the only place where he could get food and accommodation for the night.

As he reached the square he came upon a group of men who had just left the "Red Unicorn." They wore the committee men who had been elected to try the case of Tom Cairnes' murder. Among the papers that had been searched during the first inquiry, to find some clue to his enemy, one had been overlooked. It had been discovered that afternoon, and it gave another turn to the affair, by proving that his enemy was not a townsman of the place, but a stranger, and all the more important, because it led to the acquittal of a man who, in the zeal and unwise haste of one of the committee men, had been arrested. Now, as this man was popular among his fellow townsman, his arrest had caused much ill feeling among them towards the unfortunate committee man who had suggested his guilt. The other members were all anxious to make some atonement for their reckless colleague's blunder, and they were warmly—not to say noisily—discussing the case, when Newenham passed them. Overhearing some of their words, he stopped before them as they stood there, looking an excited and rather wild group of men in the dusk of the evening.

"Oh, what a weary world this is!" he said. "How it snatches a peashank man long for quiet! Go long! I'm a peashank!"

The hand that held the lantern was sharply thrust on one side, so that its rays should no longer fall upon the spectacle of degraded manhood. John Smith, who held the lantern, understood the reason of that bitter, passionate gesture of the girl by his side. He set the light gently down upon the ground and walked away from the garden gate towards the road. Perhaps until that moment, when he had seen its effects in the agony and shame of the daughter's gesture, he had never understood to the full the horrible degrading power of drink.

He did not wait for the girl to join him, knowing that she would stay out there in the lonely night till her drunken father should arouse himself sufficiently to be led back to the shed where, by the charity of the proprietor of the "Red Unicorn," he was allowed to sleep off the drunken fits of the day. Not till then would he go back with weary feet and aching eyes to her own room. The young man's face grew very gloomy indeed as he marched along the moonlit road to the distant miners' camp where he had made himself a home.

CHAPTER VI.

The acquaintance struck up between Jack Newenham and John Smith during the scuffle did not end with it. Smith came into town from his "claim" away in the mountains every day. Nobody but himself knew why he came, because the facilities for gambling, drinking and fighting, which were apparently the chief attractions to the rest of his mates, were never made use of by him.

If he generally came in the company of half a dozen miners bent "on the spree," he nearly always went back alone; and it was noticed that he was usually alone during the hour or two he stayed in the town. He would, in a large, different fashion, drop off from the rest of the party when they reached the outskirts of the town, and pursue his own course, which generally ended at the bar room, or leaned smoking against the fence that shut off the small inclosure in front of the building from the square until it was time to go home. It was here, rather earlier than usual, that Jack Newenham found him on the evening after the scuffle.

The young Englishman thanked him again for his aid, and Mr. John Smith received the thanks with coldness and curt indifference. That sudden glimpse of good breeding and education displayed the night before was the only one Jack Newenham detected. To-night Mr. John Smith was no different from the men who surrounded him. He did not return the young Englishman's advances in a friendly spirit—he even tried to repel them. But Newenham, partly from gratitude, partly from curiosity, was determined to keep up the acquaintance. He had tried to express a sense of his obligation to Mr. Snaresbrook, who at least bore unmistakably the stamp of a gentleman. But during all that day Mr. Snaresbrook had been simply incapable of receiving any thanks for favors conferred, so Newenham had been obliged to defer his expression of gratitude till a more convenient time. He began to speak of this gentleman to John Smith, when he had at last succeeded in showing the latter that he had no intention of being repulsed.

"He is a gentleman," he said; "at least I should judge so from what I saw and heard of him last night."

"He was a gentleman," was the curt answer, as John Smith knocked the

dazed condition he could see but little; in fact, he was scarcely conscious of any thing more until he found himself inside the "Red Unicorn," to which place of refuge he had been conveyed by his deliverers.

For a few moments he lay half stunned on the floor, when he had dropped down, entering. Then he struggled to his feet and found himself face to face with one of his rescuers—the young man who had rated his assailants so heartily.

"I hope they haven't damaged you much," he said, in a pure tone and with a faultless accent—"the cowardly brutes!"

"There's something under it all," he answered carelessly, "which isn't as rotten as the surface. I reckon you'll find the men aren't all brutes—and the women!" He stopped abruptly, for Mrs. Keziah had appeared in the doorway and was bearing down upon them.

"I hope she isn't going to make a row," muttered John Smith, preparing for flight.

Mrs. Keziah, however, was fairly pacific and thoroughly anxious.

"A pretty sort of man you are, John Smith," she said, with much rustling of her starched cotton gown, as she stopped before the two young men, "leading men to perdition, as if they wasn't a-goin' there fast enough of themselves, and bringing these innocent girls, who ought to have a 'ome like 'eaven for their goodness, with them!"

Jake Newenham stared, considerably bewildered and astonished at this confused—if earnest—form of address; but Mr. John Smith apparently understood, for he flushed and looked very uncomfortable. Mr. Snaresbrook had paid him an early visit at the up that morning, and had requested "to be allowed to sit in John Smith's cabin," a little while, to sleep off the headache which his walk under the burning sun had given him. John Smith, knowing that there was nothing more dangerous in the cabin than a little cold tea, had consented. When he returned from his work at noonday, he found that Mr. Snaresbrook had decamped. With sundry misgivings, and many prickings of conscience, he had stealthily searched a small hiding place where he kept a tiny store of money, and, as he had expected, not a cent remained. Mr. Snaresbrook had of course "made tracks" for the nearest "botting works." The discovery had caused John Smith much uneasiness all day. Between him and his work would rise the pale reproachful face of Snaresbrook's daughter. He felt that he was morally responsible for any state the careless drunkard might now be in. But for the uneasiness and discomfort caused by this event he would not have walked over to Deadman's Flat that evening, for he had reasons of his own for not wishing to meet the Englishman whom he had rescued from the tender mercies of the Law and Justice committee.

Mrs. Keziah's vehement reproaches confirmed his suspicions. He listened in silence to the storm at his wife's door, and, as he was about to burst into the room to get a scolding from her legal lord and master, and Jack Newenham and his other rescuer, Mr. Snaresbrook, who, seated on a box close by, had been watching with much interest the administration of the brandy. In the confusion of tongues that followed Mr. Snaresbrook stealthily appropriated the bottle, which still contained some brandy, and retired into the garden. He was about to go back to his room, when he was found slumbering near the water but—having been forbidden by Mrs. Keziah ever to approach the pump again. He was clasping the empty brandy bottle tightly in his hand, and, as they bent over him with a lantern, he stirred restlessly, opening his dull bleared eyes.

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The hand that held the lantern was sharply thrust on one side, so that its rays should no longer fall upon the spectacle of degraded manhood. John Smith, who held the lantern, understood the reason of that bitter, passionate gesture of the girl by his side. He set the light gently down upon the ground and walked away from the garden gate towards the road. Perhaps until that moment, when he had seen its effects in the agony and shame of the daughter's gesture, he had never understood to the full the horrible degrading power of drink.

CHAPTER VII.

Perhaps that silent walk in search of Miss Snaresbrook had formed a subtle bond of sympathy between the two young men; at any rate from that night John Smith did not try to avoid Jack Newenham. Another incident drew them even closer together—at least it considerably affected the young Englishman, who was beginning to feel something stronger than mere interested curiosity in this new acquaintance of his. He felt certainly that, though John Smith mingled freely among them, living their life as completely as though he had been accustomed to it all his days, he was yet as really out of place among the inhabitants of Deadman's Flat and its outlying miners' camps as Miss Snaresbrook herself. He was indeed deeply interested in them both, because

he was considerably puzzled. Any prejudice he had formed against the girl before knowing her had long since vanished, and he now thought as highly of her as did any man or woman in Deadman's Flat. He could not understand the state of affairs between herself and John Smith. He had first felt certain that it was a decided case between them; but after a few days looking on at what he expected to be a comedy of love making, he was obliged to come to the conclusion that there was really nothing between them after all. Indeed, there were moments when they almost seemed to dislike each other. They scarcely ever sought or stayed long in each other's society—they rather appeared to avoid meeting, and the constraint upon them when they did meet and talk together was more compatible with dislike or even fear than the shyness of a love not brave enough to declare itself; and yet, in spite of all, there was no doubt that John Smith had in some way constituted himself her protector, and that she silently submitted to and even leaned upon his guardianship.

All the new interests and excitements in his life still left Jack Newenham plenty of time for his own affairs; and there were moments when he could hardly force himself to stay another day away from that lonely little girl in New York, chained to the bedside of an exacting, unsmiling invalid. He had a reason for staying on which, springing out of his love for her, was strong enough to help him conquer his own desires. He had written to tell her of Mr. Thomas Cairnes' death, though he had not informed her of the manner in which he met it. He only said that Tom Cairnes was dead, and that she need fear no more for her brother. That brother himself was the reason of his staying on at the "Red Unicorn." A suspicion was forming in his own mind which he wished to verify. Surely as his questions were, watchful as he was of every word and look, Jack Newenham could gain no information from John Smith concerning his past life. His natural delicacy made it impossible to try to force a confidence; he could only wait.

In the meantime the would be avengers of the late Mr. Thomas Cairnes were not idle. The letter that had been forwarded on the day of Jack Newenham's arrival, in a crevice of the wall of the cabin honored by the presence of Mr. Cairnes when at home, was now considered a certain clew to the discovery of the murderer. The letter was dated from Vennelville, and one of the committeemen had himself gone there to make inquiries, but he had not yet returned nor sent any answer. The Hon. Jack Newenham, who had heard a good deal about the affair, partly from a hint given by Mr. John Smith and partly from his own feelings on the matter, he had given up all thought of resenting the committee's inhospitable welcome, and he had also, as John Smith had prophesied, considerably modified his opinions on the rough mining population. He had on several occasions caught glimpses of things across the surface which had made him considerably ashamed of his previously drawn conclusions.

Acting upon all these considerations, he had made advances to the Irishman who had been the chief sufferer in that slight difference of opinion, and who had come out of the fray in a much worse condition than the object of his wrath. The advances had been received with some complete absence of resentment, or even recollection of that trifling affair of honor, so that Newenham was slightly surprised, and could not help laughing. That laughter, in which the Irishman heartily joined, dispelled all lingering distrust from his heart, and they were now all on the most friendly terms. So very perfect was the understanding that Jack Newenham was induced to join the committee's meeting, with closed doors, and to inspect the important letter itself. Mr. John Smith was also included in the invitation, he having gained the public confidence by the decided genius he had shown on one or two critical occasions and the business like way in which he had helped to carry out some sentences passed in defence of law and order.

The letter, with much solemnity, was laid upon the table in the room set apart for this affair of justice until the time when it should culminate in a noose hanging from the branch of a certain tree. There was a cool determination, a quiet sternness in the dark, sunburnt faces gathered round the table that gave moral effect to the scene. Newenham took up the letter and read it calmly at length, though he had known full well that it was not a letter at all, but a trap. The writer swore he would have his revenge, even if he had to hunt Mr. Thomas Cairnes down to the death. It was dated about a week before the murder.

"Guess we're on the trail, stranger," said one of the men, as Newenham sat at last in the letter upon the table.

"Yes," he replied, his voice sounding far off in his own ears, "I've been far from it in his own case."

He drew back from the circle of stern faces, resolute men, who would be that brother's judges, and stood with his own face in the shadow. John Smith, carelessly advancing, took his place. He lifted up the letter and read it quietly through.

"I reckon this gentleman is eueched," said the man who had spoken to Newenham. It was he who had found the letter, and he was feeling very comfortable.

"You bet," said John Smith, carelessly, laying the letter down upon the table.

"Let's get out of this," whispered Newenham to him under cover of the buzz of general conversation which then began.

John Smith nodded, and they left the room together, making their way out of the house into the square. They stood for a moment looking at the open space towards the street, which was comparatively quiet to-night.

At the farther end a flare of flaming oil lamps from the open doors of the gambling saloon lighted up the summer evening dusk. Newenham, restless with a feverish excitement, harassed by doubts and fears, felt that anything would be welcome to take his thoughts away from the scene he had just witnessed. He suggested turning in there to see what sort of a place the saloon was, as he had not yet paid it a visit.

John Smith acceded by simply turning in his direction.

Some ten minutes' walking brought them to the hospitable doors of Macnab's saloon. As John Smith unconcernedly made his way through the bar room, nodding carelessly here and there to those of his acquaintances who, lounging about, helped to make up the crowd of smokers and drinkers, he followed to with a regretful thought of the fresh sweet air he had left outside.

They went on to a farther room, where tables were set about, each one containing its complement of silent, earnest gamblers, some of whom would sit all day

long come till daylight, their silence broken only by words marking the course of the game or occasional impressions as the luck changed. The two young men strolled up to the tables; John Smith, being greeted here and there with a silent nod by some of his acquaintances at the tables, took up his place near one of them. A little later Newenham, happening to look up from a game in the progress of which he himself had become interested, caught sight of his friend, and was startled at the change which had taken place in him. John Smith, leaning against the opposite wall, was watching the play of four of his friends at the table close to him. His pipe had gone out, forgotten, though clenched between his set teeth. His face was pale and rigid with the intense excitement of the unwholly lust of play, and his eyes were gleaming with a fierce light.

One of his friends at the table, glancing up at him as they proceeded to deal out a fresh hand, saw the gambling fever stamped upon his face and said:

"Take a hand yourself, boss! You look like playing stakes with old Scratch himself!"

This remark attracted the attention of the other players at the table. They looked up too, and with a laugh or an impression, according to their various moods of speech, repeated their fellow gambler's invitation.

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"I won't play!" he said, drawing himself up to his full height. "For I've sworn to myself never to touch another card as long as I live, and I'll keep my oath. But it isn't to save my pile, as you say. Take it all, and much good may it do you! It will only carry you a little faster to the misery those cards have brought me to!"

As his voice rang through the room he dashed down a handful of gold and silver on the table, scattering the cards while the coins went spinning in every direction. The outbreak was so sudden and unexpected—he had gained the nickname of Sleepy Smith—that the men for a moment were silenced. In the sudden lull John Smith turned his back upon the table and passed rapidly down the room and disappeared through the doorway.

Newenham followed as swiftly as he could. He had been looking on at the scene of temptation with an interest so painful in its intensity that it could be measured only by the relief he felt at John Smith's victory. He overtook him outside in the starlight, but they walked on for some minutes in silence, John Smith apparently quite unconscious that he had a companion. Newenham was at length forced to break the silence by that new feeling of respect for his friend which had suddenly grown up in his heart.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied John Smith, thinking Newenham alluded to what had just taken place at the card table. He spoke now without any of the affectation of roughness, and it was the refinement of a man languidly accustomed to good society. "I was mad, I think, for the moment—men are apt to make fools of themselves when they are mad."

"I did not mean that—I meant, why did you let me take you there? If I had known—"

"It's the first time I've been in such a place since— But it did not matter" rather wearily. "I wanted to see whether I could break it, and—well, as an echo of that terrible passion, 'I failed!'"

"Nonsense, my dear fellow! I don't know what has brought you here, but, after to-night, I would back you through thick and thin!"

John Smith stopped abruptly in the road, and turned to Newenham, his face looking very white in the starlight.

"You don't know," he said steadily.

"If you did, you would not say that. I am a thief. One night I was at such a place as that, and a man was there who had a bundle of bank notes. 'I found them and took them.'"

Newenham drew a step in the road. It was a terrible confession for an honorable man to hear, and, if this man who made it were the man he suspected him to be, it was tenfold more degrading and repulsive. Probably that shrinking was unconscious, for Newenham was not a man to trample upon a man who had fallen; but, unconscious or not, John Smith noticed it, and felt the degradation keenly. He too moved further away.

"Don't think I shall expect you to notice me," he said awkwardly, but with a touch of patient humility which gave the words a deep pathos. "It was because of that—that I tried to keep you off at first." Then he turned upon his heel and walked swiftly back towards the camp.

Continued next Saturday.

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"You don't know," he said steadily.

"If you did, you would not say that. I am a thief. One night I was at such a place as that, and a man was there who had a bundle of bank notes. 'I found them and took them.'"

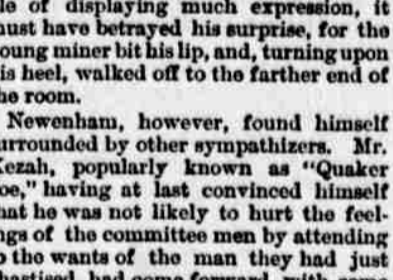
Newenham drew a step in the road. It was a terrible confession for an honorable man to hear, and, if this man who made it were the man he suspected him to be, it was tenfold more degrading and repulsive. Probably that shrinking was unconscious, for Newenham was not a man to trample upon a man who had fallen; but, unconscious or not, John Smith noticed it, and felt the degradation keenly. He too moved further away.

"Don't think I shall expect you to notice me," he said awkwardly, but with a touch of patient humility which gave the words a deep pathos. "It was because of that—that I tried to keep you off at first." Then he turned upon his heel and walked swiftly back towards the camp.

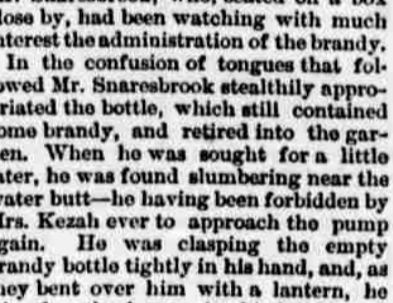
Continued next Saturday.



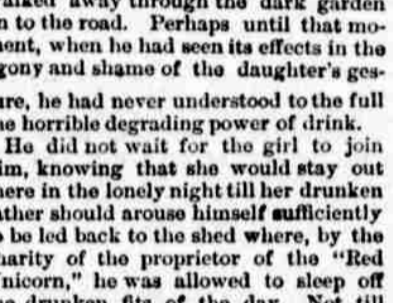
"I hope they haven't damaged you much."



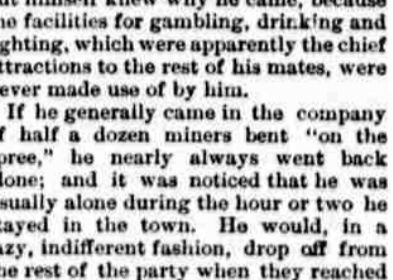
"You look like playing stakes with old Scratch himself!"



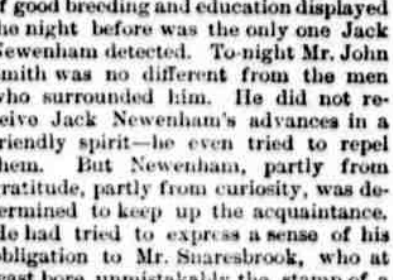
"I won't play!"



"I don't know, replied John Smith, thinking Newenham alluded to what had just taken place at the card table."



"Newenham drew a step in the road. It was a terrible confession for an honorable man to hear, and, if this man who made it were the man he suspected him to be, it was tenfold more degrading and repulsive."



"Newenham followed as swiftly as he could. He had been looking on at the scene of temptation with an interest so painful in its intensity that it could be measured only by the relief he felt at John Smith's victory."

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