



The POOL of FLAME

by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLSWORTH YOUNG

COPYRIGHT 1909 by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE



SYNOPSIS.

The story opens at Monte Carlo with Col. Terence O'Rourke, a military free lance and something of a gambler, in his hotel. Leaning on the balcony he sees a beautiful girl who suddenly enters the elevator and passes from sight. At the gaming table O'Rourke notices two men watching him. One is the Hon. Bertrid Glynn, while his companion is Viscount Dea Trebes, a duelist. The viscount tells him the French government has directed him to O'Rourke as a man who would undertake a secret mission. At his apartment, O'Rourke, who had agreed to undertake the mission, finds a mysterious letter. The viscount arrives, hands a sealed package to O'Rourke, who is not to open it until on the ocean. A pair of dainty slippers are seen protruding from under a doorway curtain. The Irishman finds the owner of the mysterious feet to be his wife, Beatrix, from whom he had run away a year previous. They are reconciled, and opening the letter he finds that a Rangoon law firm offers him 100,000 pounds for a jewel known as the Pool of Flame and left to him by a dying friend, but now in keeping of one named Chambret. In Algeria O'Rourke wrests the nobleman in a duel. The wife bids O'Rourke farewell and he promises to soon return with the reward. He discovers both Glynn and Chambret on board the ship. As he finds Chambret there is an attack by bandits and his friend dies telling O'Rourke that he has left the Pool of Flame with the governor-general, who at sight of a signet ring given the colonel will deliver over the jewel. Arriving at Algeria the Irishman finds the governor-general secured by Dea Trebes makes a mysterious appointment, and tells O'Rourke that he has gained possession of the jewel by stealing it. In a duel O'Rourke masters the viscount, secures possession of the Pool of Flame and starts by ship for Rangoon. He finds the captain to be a smuggler who tries to steal the jewel. It is finally secured by the captain and O'Rourke escapes to land. With the aid of one Danny and his sweetheart, O'Rourke recovers the Pool of Flame. On board ship once more, bound for Rangoon, a mysterious lady appears. O'Rourke comes upon a lascar about to attack the lady, who is a Mrs. Pryne, and kicks the man into the hold. Mrs. Pryne claims she is en route for India on a mission for the king.

CHAPTER XXIII.—(Continued.)

Now Danny happened to have "off" the first afternoon watch. O'Rourke from the bridge saw him come up the engine-room companion ladder, dive into the messroom for his dinner, and later emerge, picking his teeth and grinning self-complacently until his master could have kicked him, had such a course been politic before the crew, or even consistent with the dignity of his office.

"A word to say to ye, sor, if I may make so bold."

O'Rourke glanced at the helmsman, and having long since made up his mind that the man was competent, left him in possession of the bridge for a space, and joined Danny below.

"What is it?"

Danny lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Kape yer eye on that black divvie up there, sor, for the love of Hiven, and don't look surprised at anything—"

O'Rourke moved a few paces aft, along the rail, to a point whence he could see the head and shoulders of the helmsman. "Well?"

"'Tis nawthin' I cud swear to, sor, but 'tis meself that's mortal leary av these naygurs—rapspects to ye—and—and—"

"Come, come! Out with it, Danny."

"Sure, sor, 'tis the serang. Have ye chanced to notice him, sor?"

O'Rourke glanced down to the fore deck, where the personage in question was standing at ease. "What of him?" he inquired, running his eye over the fellow's superb proportions.

"'Tis nawthin' I'd take me oath to, sor, but I'm thinkin' he's the man who boarded the Panjab at Suez, sor. And as for the naygur I run against on the s'loon deck, yer honor, he's his mortal twin."

"Ah," commented O'Rourke. "Thank you, Danny."

He continued to watch the serang until the latter, as if influenced by the fixity of the Irishman's regard, turned and stared directly into O'Rourke's eyes. For a full minute he gave him look for look, dark eyes steadfast and unyielding above his fine aquiline nose, then calmly turned his back, resuming his contemplation of the turbulent horizon.

An instant later Quick came up to relieve O'Rourke, and, eight bells sounding, Danny dived below to take Dravos' place. O'Rourke, unpleasantly impressed by the incident, still forbore to mention it to either of the ship's owners; he retired to think it over, and spent a long hour consuming an indifferent cigar and studying the cracks in the bulkhead between his room and the cabin.

"Without profit, however. Lacking more substantial proof than Danny's suspicions, he could arrive at no definite conclusion.

The night passed without incident; the second day dawned the counterpart of its predecessor, and wore away quietly enough.

It fell to O'Rourke to stand the first dog-watch, from four to six in the evening. Shortly after he ascended the bridge, it was his happiness to be joined by Mrs. Pryne, who improved the moment to express her gratification with the droitious tide in her af-

fairs. The King's courier was pleased to declare herself very well pleased indeed, though she admitted, under jocular pressure, that she considered she was roughing it. Captain Quick's quarters were by no means palatial, and the bill of fare, while substantially composed, lacked something of variety; but that was all a part of the great and fascinating game she played—the game of secret service to His Majesty, Edward VII.

Not that alone, but she was comforted by the assurance that her voyage would soon be over, her mission discharged, her responsibility a thing of the past. She would be glad to see Bombay.

"One never knows, you know, Colonel O'Rourke," she said with a little gesture expressive of her allowance for the unforeseen.

O'Rourke divined she had something on her mind which she hesitated to voice, though they were practically alone; the man at the wheel was a nonentity—bronze statue in a faded shirt, ragged turban and soiled cummerbund.

"Then 'tis yourself will be glad, I gather, to be rid of us, madam?"

She smiled, deprecatory. "What would you?" she asked in French, with a significant glance up into O'Rourke's eyes.

"It's not precisely pleasant to be constantly apprehensive," the woman continued in the same tongue, "even when one has a Colonel O'Rourke to look to for protection."

"Ah, madame!" expostulated the wanderer. "But what makes ye so positive I'd not turn tail and run away from any real danger?"

She gave him a look that brimmed with mirth. "A man who is a coward," she said slowly, "doesn't stand still and draw a revolver when a heavy knife is thrown at his head."

"Quick told ye, madam?"

"No, I saw—heard the quarrelling on the forward deck and got to the companionway in time to see what happened. Had you not been so intent on your search for the knife, you would have seen me. As it was, I slipped below again without attracting attention."

"But why?"

"To get my revolver, monsieur le colonel."

"'Twas naught but an accident—"

"You do not believe that yourself, colonel dear; for my part, I—"

"Well?"

"Someone tried my door last night, after you'd retired."

"Ye are sure?" doubted O'Rourke, disturbed.

"Quite. I was awake—thinking; I heard you come below and close your door at eight bells; long after there were footsteps—someone walking in his bare feet—in the saloon. Then the knob was turned, very gently. Fortunately, the door was bolted; someone put a shoulder to it, but it held fast. I caught up my revolver—indeed and I am very reckless with it, sir!—and opened the door myself. The saloon was quite empty."

"Ye shouldn't have risked that—"

"I had to know, with so much at stake," she said simply.

O'Rourke endeavored to manufacture a plausible and reassuring explanation to the fact. "Quick, Danny, or Dravos, mistaking their rooms—"

"It was none of them. Captain Quick was on deck; I heard his voice almost simultaneously, surely I couldn't mistake that." She laughed. "Nor would your man or Mr. Dravos have been so stealthy, so instant to escape."

"But—but—"

"My theory, if you will have it, is that mine enemy of the Panjab is one of the crew of the Rancee, monsieur."

Mrs. Pryne made this statement as quietly as though she were commenting on the weather. But her belief chimed so exactly with his own that O'Rourke was stricken witless and at a loss to frame a satisfactory refutation. He was silent for some moments, his lips a thin hard line, a crinkle of anxiety between his brows.

"If ye'd only permitted me to attend to him—" he growled at length.

"You are right," she admitted, "but—I am desolated—the mischief's done."

"Faith, yes!" he sighed dejectedly. His gaze roved the deck and fastened upon the serang. "It might be any one of them," he considered aloud.

"Any one. For instance, though—the serang?"

"Why d'ye suspect him more than another?" he demanded, startled.

"Call it feminine intuition, if you like. The man looks capable of anything."

"Yes. But sure, there's no telling at all."

"No telling," she concurred quietly.

"We can but wait, watch, hope that I imagined the hand at my door."

"There might be something in that."

"I am neither nervous nor an imaginative woman."

"At all events, I'll go bail 'twill not happen a second time."

"How do you propose to prevent it?"

"Sure, the simplest way in the world. I myself will stand guard in the saloon, madam."

"But no, monsieur; I can better afford to lose a little sleep than have you forfeit your rest. Besides, I have Cecile. . . ."

There ensued an argument without termination; he remained obdurate, she insistent. Only the appearance of Quick on the stroke of four bells forced them to shelve the subject. It was resumed at the dinner table and carried out in a light manner of banter for a time, dropped and forgotten, apparently by all but O'Rourke.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The night fell clear as crystal and wonderfully bright with stars; the wind went down with the sun, then rose again refreshed and waxed to half a gale. At midnight O'Rourke, leaving the bridge, left the Rancee driv-



A Cry of Horror, Despair and Rage Stuck in the Wanderer's Throat.

ing steadily through a racing sea, through a world noisy with the crisp rattle and crash of breaking crests.

Fortifying himself with strong coffee, the adventurer settled himself in a chair by the foot of the companionway steps leading up from the tiny saloon that served as dining-room for all but the crew of the tramp. From this position he commanded both entrances, port and starboard, from the upper deck, as well as the doors that flanked them on either hand, to the quarters occupied by Mrs. Pryne and to Dravos' stateroom, which was empty and would be so until the next change of watch.

The succeeding hours dragged interminably, quiet and uneventful.

About six bells the moon got up, and its rays, filtering through the heavy-ribbed glass of the skylight, filled the saloon with an opalescent shimmer that assorted incongruously with the dull glow of the electric bulbs—dull, because there was something wrong with the dynamo, according to Dravos.

O'Rourke, weary and yawning, watched the milky rainbow dance upon the half-opaque glass overhead for several moments before it conveyed to him a warning. Then immediately he abandoned his seat and stretched himself out upon a transom against the after bulkhead, whence he could see something less of the upper gangway, but sufficient for his purposes. For his chair had been beneath the skylight,

and the wings of that were open for ventilation.

"'Tis safer here," he considered. "There'll be no dropping one of those long knives on me now, be premeditated inadvertence, I'm thinking."

He gaped tremendously. The peace of the night, the singing of the waves against the Rancee's sides, the deep throbb and unbroken surge of her engines, and the sustained, clear note of the monsoon in her wire rigging—these combined with physical fatigue to soothe the man, to lull him into fantastic borderland of dreams. Yet such was his command of self that he would not yield to the caressing touch of drowsiness, but merely lay motionless and at rest, communing with his fancy.

And that led him out of the sordid saloon of the Rancee across the seas that lay ahead of that ship's prow, to the fair land whither he was to convey the Pool of Flame.

Ablutely he leapt to his feet, wide awake and raging.

A blow was still sounding through the saloon a dull crash. Buried half way to the hilt in the bulkhead back of the transom a knife quivered. Instinctively the wanderer's fingers had closed upon the grip of his revolver. He pulled the trigger almost before he realized what had happened and sent a bullet winging toward a spot

Under its influence he forgot the desperate case of which this tragedy brought all aboard the Rancee, put out his arms, received the falling body, and let it gently to the deck.

But in a trice he was alive again to his own peril. In the twinkling of an eye he saw a flash of light gliding towards him with resistless impetus. Intuitively he swung to one side, to the right, and leapt to his feet. At that the knife, a kris sinuous and keen, ran cold upon the flesh of his chest, slit through his shirt, caught in the thong that held the Pool of Flame, and tore out, leaving a flapping hole and scraping a hand's breadth of skin from his forearm. Heedless of this, only in fact subconsciously aware that the chamolis bag had fallen to the deck, he caught at the hand that had wielded the kris; his fingers closed about the wrist, and, bracing himself, he swung the assassin off his feet. So doing, his fingers slipped on the man's greasy skin and he stumbled off his balance.

His object, however, had been accomplished. The murderer, buried a yard or more through the air, fell and slid along the deck into a group of lascars, one of whom, like a nine-pin, was knocked over and fell atop of him.

O'Rourke recovered and stepped forward, revolver poised to administer the quietus to the murderer—an amiable intention which was, however, doomed to frustration. With almost inconceivable swiftness the group of lascars had become a mere tangle of arms and legs, a melange of struggling limbs and bodies. Where he had thought to find a single prostrate form, there were six struggling in confusion on the deck.

For a thought he stayed his finger on the trigger, waiting to pick out the unarmost and slay him first of all, unwilling, furthermore, to waste one of the four invaluable cartridges remaining in his revolver. And then—unexpectedly the tragedy seemed over and done with altogether.

From the bottom of the heap of bodies a terrible cry of mortal anguish shrilled loud; and almost at once the mob seemed to resolve into its original elements. Five lascars crawled, arose, or flung themselves away from the sixth, who lay inert, prone, limbs still twitching, a knife buried in his back.

For a thought the tableau held, there in the pure brilliance of the moonlight; the half a dozen standing figures, O'Rourke a space apart from the rest, and two bodies, the one face down, Quick with a face to the stars, each with its dread background; a black stain that grew and spread slowly upon the white, dazzling planks.

Quietly the tallest of the lascars moved forward, knelt and drew the knife from the back of his dead fellow. He straightened up, facing O'Rourke without a tremor, his eyes afire, and wiped the blade of the kris on his cummerbund.

"Do not shoot, sahib," he said smoothly in excellent English. "Do not shoot, sahib, for it is I who have avenged. This dog," and with his toe he stirred the thing at his feet, "ran amok. Now he is dead."

This was the serang who spoke. O'Rourke eyed him coldly through a prolonged silence. At length, "That seems quite evident," he admitted coolly. "Pick up that body and throw it overboard!" he commanded sharply.

In obedience to a sign from the serang, two of the lascars seized the body. A subsequent splash overseas told the Irishman that his order had been carried out. But he heard it abstractedly, confronted as he was with a problem whose difficulty was not to be underestimated, the problem embodied in the statuesque, imperturbable serang.

It was hard to know what to do, what to believe, what action to take. If he were right in his surmise, the serang should rightly be shot down instantly, without an instant's respite. Yet the heartless brutality upon which his theory was based made him hesitate. It was difficult to believe that the serang had been able to accomplish what O'Rourke was inclined to credit him with; that he, the wielder of the kris, the murderer of Quick, thrown off his feet by the Irishman's attack, had deliberately involved his fellows with him in his fall and profited by the confusion to slay one upon whom he could throw the blame for all that had happened.

The weapon quivered in O'Rourke's grasp. More than once in that brief debate he was tempted to shoot the fellow on suspicion. Yet he held his hand; he could not be positive. With every circumstance against him, he might still be telling the truth. The whole horrible affair might boil down to nothing more than an insane crime of a crazy Malay, one who, as the serang claimed, had "run amok."

He had not made up his mind when his thoughts were given a new turn by a new complication, in the shape of Mrs. Pryne herself. That lady came up the companion steps with no apparent hesitation, no fear or apprehension; quietly and confidently alert, on the other hand, she was visibly armed and prepared against danger in whatever form she might have to encounter it.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Printing in China.

If reports are to be relied on, they had the art of printing in China "2,400 years ago." It was block printing, however, though it is said that they had something very like movable type in the middle of the tenth century. There may be some doubt as to the exact period, but there is no room for questioning the fact that for many centuries before it was known in Europe the art was well known in China.

COUNT BRIDGE EXTRAS DEAR

Pittsburghers Draw Comparison With Philadelphia Structure

IS FOUR TIMES THE COST

Second Largest Concrete Span in the World Investigation for Graft—Charge for \$16,000 Worth of Extras Made and Allowed.

Pittsburgh.—The second largest concrete bridge in the world, the Larimer avenue bridge here, which was erected entirely as a municipal project at a cost close to \$1,000,000, threatens to become involved in a contractor's canal as a result of revelations in The Harpoon, an independent weekly magazine. After the bridge was completed the contracting firm of John F. Casey & Co. put in a bill for \$16,200.25 for "extras," which was approved by Mayor William A. Magee and his Director of Public Works, Joseph G. Armstrong. The Voters' League threatens to use the charges as a basis for reopening the Councilman's inquiry into the official acts of Public Works Director Armstrong, Public Safety Director John Morin and Health Director E. R. Walters. Bearing out its charge that the city was flim-flammed, The Harpoon shows that certain work, known as bush-hammer finish, was charged for at four times the cost the city of Philadelphia paid for the same work in the building of a bridge there.

Hunt Down Boy Bandits.

Altoona.—Living like bandits in an untenanted shanty in the mountains back of Lakemont Park, John Soricck and Joseph Buckreis, each aged 15, conducted a series of robberies that had the police worried, because of the absence of clues, although they were apparently committed by boys. The theft of a basket of eggs from a farmer led to the boys' undoing, however, for he reported the whereabouts of the pair to the police, who surprised them while they slept at midnight. Prepared for resistance, the lads had beside them a loaded rifle and revolver, with plenty of reserve ammunition. All told six burglaries are charged against them.

Sandow Weeps in a Cell.

Allentown.—Fred Sandow, a strong man who had been giving exhibitions in this city and claiming to be a son of Eugene Sandow, was arrested by the police on a charge of beating and choking his wife, a frail mite of woman. When taken to the police station the strong man cried like a child, and begged to be released. His wife is under the care of a physician. Sandow claims to have stood off Hackenschmidt, the wrestler, for eight minutes in New York City.

Buckle Saves His Life.

Norristown.—A suspender buckle saved the life of Howard K. Johnson, of West Conshohocken, while he was working on the Hermitage property. He was in his shirt sleeves, on a high point overlooking the Schuylkill River, when he felt a stinging sensation about his heart. He found that he had been struck by a spent bullet, the ball being flattened and fast in his suspender buckle. He thinks the shot was fired by a reckless gunner.

Horse on Its Owner's Head.

Lancaster.—John Andes, an aged farmer of Willow street, was instantly killed here. He had attended market and was engaged in hitching his horses, preparatory to returning home. One of the animals became frightened and plunged; Andes fell, and the horse stepped on his head and pulled the heavy wagon over his body.

Bullets Burn Up a Thresher.

Williamsport.—An incendiary made a target of a threshing machine belonging to Henry Hauser, which he left standing along the public road, and when Hauser came to get the thresher to move to a farmer's barnyard to thrash, he found only a pile of ashes.

Dives Three Times to Save.

Willow Grove.—Diving three times, Clinton W. Morgan, of this place, hauled up from the bottom of the Morgan dam, 10 feet deep, 12-year-old John Roberts, who had sunk while bathing, and who was apparently drowned. Three hours' heroic work completely resuscitated the boy.

Engineer Hurt in Collision.

York.—A rear-end collision between two southbound freight trains on the Northern Central Railway, near Wago, York county, resulted in the serious injury of Engineer William A. Wise, of this city. He was taken to the Harrisburg Hospital, hurt internally.

Gets Civil War Hurt Cut Out.

Altoona.—After carrying a lump on his head for 50 years, Major John R. Garden, veteran of the civil war, walked to the hospital and asked that it be removed, as it had lately been annoying him. When it was suggested that he submit to an anesthetic, he shook his head. "I'll undergo the operation without," he said, and he did. Major Garden was shot by a Confederate sharpshooter in the Rebellion, but after the wound healed it never gave him any trouble until recent years, when it began to enlarge.