

The POOL of FLAME

by LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLSWORTH YOUNG

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SYNOPSIS.

The story opens at Monte Carlo with Col. Terence O'Rourke, a military free lance and something of a gambler, in his cotter sitting on a 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. Berde Glyn, while his companion is Viscount Des 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, Beatrice, 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 worships the nobleman in a duel. The wife bids O'Rourke farewell and he promises to soon return with the reward. He discovers both Glyn and the viscount 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 away. Des 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 assistance of one Danny, his sweetheart, O'Rourke recovers the Pool of Flame. On board ship once more, bound for Rangoon, a mysterious lady appears. O'Rourke is upon a ladder about to attack the lady, who is Mrs. Pryne, and kicks the man into the hold. Mrs. Pryne claims she is en route for Indiana on a mission for the king. O'Rourke is attacked by the lazar, who secures the Pool of Flame, the captain is shot and the lazar jumps into the sea. The ship arrives in port. Danny hands O'Rourke the Pool of Flame which he has stolen from Mrs. Pryne. It is the real jewel, the one lost at sea being a counterfeit. O'Rourke goes to Calcutta and discovers Des Trebes disguised. He now knows that Mrs. Pryne was an accomplice.

CHAPTER XXIX.

As time went on, however, if his uneasiness were not sensibly diminished, nothing happened, the voyage proving entirely uneventful; and O'Rourke was forced to the conclusion that, if Monsieur de Hyeres were really the Vicomte des Trebes, he was strangely content to play a waiting game.

The Irishman, however, had known stranger things than that one man should seem the counterpart of another. And by nothing more than this questionable accident of resemblance did De Hyeres give him reason to believe him anything but what he claimed to be. The man's demeanor was consistently discreet and self-contained; he moved about the ship openly and without any apparent attempt to pry upon the doings of the adventurer, whom he fell into the easy ship-board way of greeting amiably but coolly. Only in one instance, indeed, did they exchange more than but courteous salutations, and then De Hyeres himself seemed to seek the interview, approaching O'Rourke directly.

This was at night, when O'Rourke occupied a chair on the leeward side of the saloon deck, consuming a meditative after-dinner cigar. De Hyeres stepped out of the companionway, glanced swiftly this way and that, and sauntered toward the Irishman with an unlighted cigarette held conspicuously between his fingers.

O'Rourke likewise surveyed his surroundings in two brief glances; and was contented to find that they were alone, or as much alone as two can be upon a steamship. For they were, after all, well matched; and one of them he knew to be armed. Shifting in his chair so that his revolver lay convenient to his hand, as De Hyeres approached the Irishman removed his cigar from between his teeth, flicked away an inch of ash and silently proffered it in the prescribed fashion.

The Frenchman accepted the courtesy with a bow, applied the fire to his cigarette, inhaled deeply and returned the cigar with a formal phrase of thanks. He lingered for a moment, puffing and gazing off over the black, starlit expanse of the Bay of Bengal, lonely to its dim and far horizon, then observed quietly: "I am not mistaken, I believe, in understanding I have the honor to address Monsieur le Colonel O'Rourke, Chevalier of the Legion of Honour?"

"You are not mistaken, monsieur," returned O'Rourke pleasantly, then with the directness which he sometimes found useful, watching the man closely as he spoke: "And I believe it is my pleasure to recognize Monsieur Le Vicomte des Trebes?"

"Des Trebes, monsieur?" The Frenchman's look of wonder was beyond criticism and there was no least trace of discomfiture to be detected in his manner. "But no. You are

under a mistake. I am merely a French gentleman without a title; Raoul de Hyeres is my name."

"Ah!" said the wanderer. "Twas the resemblance misled me. Pardon, monsieur."

"Granted, my dear sir. . . . Des Trebes? The name has a familiar sound. Do I not remember reading somewhere that the Vicomte des Trebes died last spring? In Tunis, was it? . . . Suddenly, I believe."

"Is it so?" said O'Rourke drily. "Possibly. The vicomte lived in the manner of those who meet with sudden deaths."

The subject languished, and after a few more noncommittal observations De Hyeres wandered off, presumably in search of the English girl, to whom he had been paying assiduous attention. On closer scrutiny, she had proved to be a remarkably pretty girl; although, in point of fact, O'Rourke, for all that he admired her looks immensely, had purposely avoided her. This he did for motives of prudence; he mistrusted the combination formed by De Hyeres and the girl. The latter might be all that she looked and claimed to be: a sweet, wholesome and rather ingenuous young Englishwoman, an orphan, resident in Rangoon in the household of an uncle, to whom she was returning after a visit with friends in Simla. On the passenger list her name stood as Emilia Pynsent. But the adventurer felt it the course of wisdom to deny himself the pleasure of her acquaintance, so long as she permitted the attentions of the Frenchman.

Whether, considering the hot weather and such self-imposed restrictions, O'Rourke considered the voyage hardly a success from a social point of view. He kept pretty much to himself and to Danny, and to make assurance doubly sure he instituted a new regime with regard to the Pool of Flame: that jewel never left his stateroom. When O'Rourke was on

O'Rourke was not one to resist its allure. Four bells saw him lounging at the rail below the bridge, staring hungrily over toward the land. It was in his mind that another twelve hours or so would see him relieved of his trust; and as the time drew nigh impatience burned hotly within him; he had become full weary of the Pool of Flame and was anxious to be free of the thing, to have its chapter in his history closed forever.

Far over the water a white and flashing light lifted up and caught his eye, a nameless beacon bright against the darkness at the base of the Arakan hills, guardian of the perils of those shallow seas. And simultaneously he became conscious of a presence at his elbow; as he turned sharply the English girl addressed him in a voice sweet-toned and quiet.

"What is that light, if you please, Colonel O'Rourke?"

"Faith, that I can't say, Miss Pynsent."

Her eyes flashed a laugh upon him in the gloom. "Then you know my name?"

"Even as yourself knew mine. 'Twould be strange otherwise, with our ship's company so small."

"But I," she returned, animated, "am such an insignificant person—while you are the Colonel O'Rourke."

"Ye do me an honor I'm not deserving, Miss Pynsent, but 'tis proud I am entirely that a humble soldier of fortune should be known to ye by reputation."

"Oh, I've grown quite weary of your fame, Colonel O'Rourke," she countered with a trace of laughing impudence. "Hardly anything has interested Monsieur De Hyeres, these past few days, save anecdotes of your exploits."

"'Tis kind of him, to be sure. I must cultivate his acquaintance and learn from him to know meself, I see."

If she detected the irony she overlooked or failed to understand it.



The Frenchman Accepted the Courtesy With a Bow.

deck or at meals, Danny sat behind bolts, alert and under arms, and vice versa. By night they stood regular watches together, the one on guard while the other slept. Clearly the adventurer was determined that no lack of safeguards on his part should again deprive him of the ruby.

But it's no easy matter to avoid meeting any particular person on a ship with a small saloon list, unless one is willing to be purposely rude and discourteous. For all his wariness the Irishman was to carry with him a personal impression of Miss Pynsent.

On the last day of the passage, toward evening, the Poonah raised the coast of Burmah; by dark she was steaming steadily southwards along the littoral, heading for the delta of the Irrawaddy.

A still, bright night with little wind:

seems my kismet to abide in Rangoon forever and a day. You see, my only living relative is an uncle, Mr. Lansdowne Sypher, and he's got no one else to keep house for him."

"Lansdowne Sypher . . . !"

The ejaculation sprang to O'Rourke's lips before he could restrain it.

"Yes. Do you know him? He's the junior, you know, of the firm of Secretan and Sypher."

"Solicitors, are they not? . . . No; 'tis me misfortune not to know your uncle. But the name of his firm I've heard."

The genial nature of the Irishman, which had insensibly warmed to the girl's charm, withdrew abruptly, tortoise-like, into a shell of reserve. The element of coincidence had again entered into his affairs, and he had learned a bitter lesson from experience—to distrust coincidence on general principles. "There's naught so common in life as coincidences," he philosophized, "and be the same token naught so dangerous."

For which reason he invented an early excuse to terminate the conversation, and ungallantly withdrew to the seclusion of his stateroom, where he passed a night that seemed interminable; for he lay long in a wakeful pain of imagination, scheming out a hundred stratagems whereby he might confuse as many possible attempts to prevent the due and safe delivery of the Pool of Flame into the hands of Mr. Lansdowne Sypher.

CHAPTER XXX.

Toward the close of the following day the Poonah dropped anchor in the river roadstead off Rangoon; and within the ensuing hour her passengers had deserted her. De Hyeres and Miss Pynsent in their van, O'Rourke among the last to leave. And nothing hindered him, not the least hitch delayed his disembarkation. It was curious, it was incredible, it was disturbing. He took away with him no ease of mind whatever.

There were tikkagharris waiting, and without a breath's delay the adventurer and his servant climbed into the nearest and desired to be conveyed to the offices of Messrs. Secretan and Sypher. The vehicle whirled them swiftly away and into the main-traveled way of Rangoon, Mogul street.

In front of a structure of stone and iron so palpably an office building that it might have been transplanted to the Strand without exciting comment—save for the spotless cleanliness of it—their tikkagharry drew up. The gharrivallah indicated the offices of Messrs. Secretan and Sypher, one flight up—and named his fare. O'Rourke paid him and alighted, with Danny at his heels and his heart trying to choke him. The hour of fulfillment was at hand—and all was well! He who had faced death in a hundred shapes of terror, unflinching, found himself in a flutter of nerves that would have disgraced a school-girl.

He dodged into the building, took the steps three at a stride . . . and suddenly found himself in the presence of, more than that, closeted with the man to meet whom he had crossed half the world at peril of his life: Mr. Lansdowne Sypher.

"Colonel O'Rourke?" Sypher's manner was very cordial. "I'm glad to see you. You are within your time, yet I had begun to despair of you. Be seated." He indicated a chair beside his desk. "And permit me; you of all men will appreciate the precaution."

He laughed and went to the windows, adjusting the wooden shades in such a manner that the light was tempered and no portion of the room could be visible to anyone spying from a window in one of the adjacent buildings. The he turned and smiled cheerfully at the stupefied adventurer.

"I have it here," said O'Rourke; "safe be the mercy of several highly potential saints!" He laughed uneasily, fumbling in his breast pocket. "There it is," said he, tossing the stone in its chamois covering upon the solicitor's desk.

Sypher himself betrayed some evidences of nervousness as he sat forward and lifted the case by its leather thong. He let it dangle before him for an instant, watching it with a curious, speculative smile. . . . "Well," he said, "really . . . !"

And after a pause; "I congratulate you, Colonel O'Rourke. And I admire you immensely. . . . You see, when this commission was offered us, I considered seriously the project of going in search of you in person and bringing the stone back to Rangoon myself. But then—although I'm not really a timorous man—I knew the circumstances so well—I feared I should never reach Rangoon alive."

"Yes." He thrust a hand into his waistcoat pocket and produced a penknife, with which he began to slit the stitches that enclosed the ruby. "You've been wondering, no doubt, why so enormous a reward was offered."

"I have that," assented O'Rourke.

"It was partly because of the danger," said Sypher, intent upon his occupation. "You know, these Burmese are a curiously pious folk; when one of them grows rich he employs the major part of his fortune in building a temple—or in some such work. This particular gentleman—a very wealthy merchant—chose to give half of what he had to the restoration of the Pool of Flame to the Buddha from which it was originally stolen. But he, too, was afraid. He's superstitious about the stone—believes it had luck to touch it so long as it remains away from its Buddha. So he came to us. . . . I myself am not superstitious, but . . ."

He ceased to speak abruptly, for the Pool of Flame lay naked, a blinding marvel, in the hollow of his palm. O'Rourke heard him gasp and was conscious of his hastened respiration. Watching the man intently, he saw a strange shade of pallor color his face.

"'Tis meself," said the adventurer, "that's no more superstitious than ye, sir. Yet I'm willing to confess I'm glad the thing's out of me hands at last."

Sypher seemed to recollect himself as one coming out of a state of stupor. He stood up and looked the ruby carefully into a pocket of his trousers. "Come," he said crisply. "Let us step across the street to the bank. The money's there for you, sir—the reward."

CHAPTER XXXI.

Back in his stateroom on the Poonah, O'Rourke threw himself into the lower berth and lay there, a forearm flung across his eyes, thinking excitedly, disturbed by formless forebodings.

Beside him Danny was packing industriously, with now and again a pause during which he would stare reflectively, his gaze fixed upon his employer's face, a little puzzled and perplexed.

The Poonah was pausing overnight to discharge and take aboard cargo; for this reason O'Rourke in his haste to get ashore had not delayed to take his luggage with him. . . . On deck, fore and aft donkey engines were puffing and chugging and chain tackles rattling as they lifted freight to and from the hold and the lighters alongside.

Abruptly, without moving, O'Rourke spoke. "I'll want evening clothes, Danny," said he. "'Tis dining I am tonight with Mr. Straker and his niece, Miss Pynsent, who came with us from Diamond Harbor. 'Twill save a bit of bother to dress before I go ashore."

"A-w-w," said Danny, assimilating. . . . "And the missus?" he said suddenly, some minutes later. "M'an't Madam O'Rourke, sor. Did ye get no word from her?"

"For what else would I be driving to every hotel in the town after leaving Mr. Sypher, Danny, but to inquire for her? She's not here; but she'll come, be sure. She's still got several days—three or four—in which to keep our trust. 'Tis discontented I am not to find her waiting for me, but I'm satisfied entirely she'll keep faith."

"And," insisted Danny eagerly—"beggin' yer honor's pardon—but what will ye have to tell her, sor?"

O'Rourke sat up. "Have to tell her? What d'ye mean?"

"I mean, sor, I'm dyin' wid the wish to know how ut's all turned out. Please, yer honor, won't ye be tellin' me? Is ut—is ut all right?"

"Bless your heart, Danny!" laughed O'Rourke. "'Tis so dazed I've been that I never thought to tell ye—thinking all the time that ye knew. 'Tis all right, indeed, me boy. The Pool of Flame's in Mr. Sypher's keeping and the money's in mine—in the bank, Danny, payable to me order. Think of it—one hundred thousand pounds of real money, and all me own. 'Tis ridiculous, 'tis absurd. 'Tis meself hardly credits the truth of it all; yet I was there—saw the man, gave him the jewel, went to the bank with him and for the space of five minutes sat at a table, with all that money before me, counting it over, bill by bill, a square hundred of them, each for a thousand pounds, guaranteed by the Bank of England! . . . Think of that—all that belonging to me—to me, O'Rourke! . . ."

"Thank God!" breathed Danny devotedly. "But did ye I'm nothin' about the stone?"

"Little enough, Danny—only a part of the meaning of the whole devilish business; the rest I'm to know tonight. Mr. Sypher 'll be tellin' me after we've dined; he wants to hear me own end of the story, too."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Judge Without Prisoners. St. Helena is a curiously among our colonies, inasmuch as its governor is also chief justice, although he may never have opened a law book. The retiring ruler, Sir Henry Gallaway, is a soldier, and in reviewing his nine years' administration the little local paper mentions that he presided at 33 courts of quarter sessions, but at 21 of them there was no business except presentation of white gloves. The absence of serious crime is declared to be both remarkable and gratifying in view of the "struggle for existence, and the fact that since the withdrawal of the garrison St. Helena has been in a state of bankruptcy."—London Chronicle.

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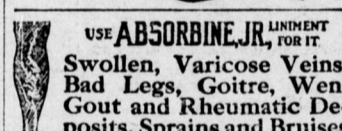
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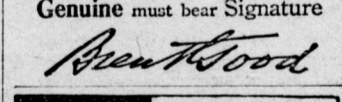
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