

THE ROOT OF EVIL

BY THOMAS DIXON



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PROLOGUE.

This remarkable tale, in which each character is sketched from life by a master hand, goes beneath the surface of modern society and lays bare the canker at the root. Like all Mr. Dixon's work, it is a tale of American life, essentially true in the picture it draws and done with a swinging power which brings its dramatic scenes home to us. The splendid strength of the tales lies in the conflict between James Stuart and Nan, in which love and greed of wealth struggle for mastery.

CHAPTER I.

A Star Boarder.

At the end of a warm spring day in New York, James Stuart sat in the open window of his room on Washington square smiling. With a sense of deep joy he watched the trees shake the raindrops from their new emerald robes and the flying clouds that decked the western sky melt into seas of purple and gold.

A huckster turned into Fourth street crying: "Straw—berries, straw—berries!" And the young lawyer laughed lazily. A flood of tender memories stole into his heart from the sunlit fields of the south. He had gone hunting wild strawberries with Nan Primrose on the hills at home in North Carolina the day he first knew that he loved her.

How beautiful she was that day in the plain blue cotton dress which fitted her superb young figure to perfection! How well he remembered every detail of that ramble over the red hills—he could hear now the whistle of a Bob White sitting on the fence near the spring where they lunched, calling to his mate. As Nan nestled closer on the old stile they saw the little brown bird slip from her nest in a clump of straw, lift her head and softly answer.

"Look!" Nan had whispered excitedly. "There's her nest!" He recalled distinctly his tremor of sympathetic excitement as her warm hand drew him to the spot. With peculiar vividness he remembered the extraordinary moisture of the palm of her hand trembling with eager interest as he counted the eggs—twenty beauties. But above all memories stood out one. As he bent close above her he caught for the first time in his life the delicate perfume of her dark rich hair and felt the thrill of its mystery.

"It's their little home, isn't it, Jim?" she exclaimed. "I hope I can build as snug a nest for you some day, Nan!" he whispered gravely.

And when she stood silent and blushing he made the final plunge. Looking straight into her dark eyes he had said: "I love you, dear Nan!" As she stood very still, looking down in silence, with a throb of fear and a tender tenderness he dared to slip his arms around her waist and kiss the trembling lips. And then he noticed for the first time a deep red strawberry stain in the corner of her mouth. In spite of her struggles he laughingly insisted on kissing it away.

And then as a dreamy smile stole into her face she suddenly threw her arms around his neck in passionate tenderness, returning with interest every kiss he had taken.

"Straw—berries!" The man looked up and drawled his familiar cry.

"Yes, yes!" he shouted. "Two boxes. Put them on the stoop—and keep the change!" He threw the man a silver dollar, and the white teeth of the Italian signaled a smile of thanks as he bowed low, lifting his dirty cap in acknowledgment.

Nor was Nan's beauty merely a memory; it was the living presence, the source of the joy that filled his soul to overflowing today, for she had grown more beautiful than ever since her mother had moved to New York.

He had always believed that the real reason in the back of Mrs. Primrose's shallow head for this move to the north had been the determination to break his engagement and make a more brilliant marriage for Nan. And so when they left he followed. The mother had always professed for

him unbounded loyalty and admiration, but he had never been deceived. He knew that Mrs. Primrose lied as she breathed—politely, but continuously—by her involuntary muscles. Day and night since they had reached New York she had schemed for Nan.

She had leased a house in the fashionable neighborhood of Gramercy park, and to meet the extraordinary expense began a careful and systematic search for rich young men to whom she could let two floors.

Stuart was sure in his heart that Nan had never joined in those plans of her mother, though he had wished that she might have shown a little more strength in resisting them.

Well, he was going to win at last, and the world was full of music! He had the biggest surprise of life in store for Nan, something no true woman's heart could resist. He had succeeded after incredible difficulties in secretly building a cottage by the sea in Brooklyn. Its lawn sloped to the water's edge, and a trim boat lay nodding at the dock. Neither Mrs. Primrose nor Nan had the faintest suspicion of what he had been doing.

Tomorrow he would lead his sweetheart into this holy of holies of life, the home love had built. He could see now the smile of tenderness break over her proud face as he should hand her the keys and ask her to fix the wedding day.

His reveries were broken by a timid knock on the door and a faint call: "Jim!"

"Come in!" he cried. "You're not a bit glad to see me," the soft voice said. "I've been standing out here for ages."

"Forgive me, Sunshine. I must have been dreaming," Stuart pleaded, leaping from his seat and seizing her hand. "I'm awfully glad to see you!"

"Then don't call me that name again," she pouted. "But isn't it beautiful?"

"It would be if my hair wasn't red and I didn't have freckles and was older," she protested, looking away to hide her emotion.

"But your hair isn't quite red, Harriet. It's just the color of the gold in honeycomb," he answered, gently touching her disheveled locks. "Besides, those few little freckles are becoming on your pink and white skin, and you are nearly fifteen. Well, I'll just say, 'little pal.' How's that?"

"That's better," she said, with a smile and sigh. "Oh, Jim, I've been so dreadfully lonely since you were away! I declare, Jim, I'll die if you go away again. I just can't stand it!"

Stuart smilingly took her hand. "Lonely, Miss Chatterbox, when that big father of yours worships the very ground you walk on!"

"Yes, I know he does, Jim, and I love him, too, but you've no idea how dreadfully still the house is when you are gone. Oh, say, I want you to be a real boarder and eat with us. Of course you will."

must be awfully important. He looked so worried. I don't think I ever saw him worried before."

"I'll go at once," Stuart said. He strode rapidly across town toward the Bowery, through Fourth street, wondering what could have happened to break the accustomed good humor of the doctor.

The doctor had long since retired from the practice of medicine as a profession and only used it now as his means of ministering to the wants of his neighbors. His neighbors were a large tribe, however, scattered all the way from the cellars and dives of Water street to the shanties and goat ranges of the upper Harlem. Stuart had never met a man so full of contagious health. He was a born physician. There was healing in the touch of his big hand. Healing light streamed from his brown eyes, and his iron gray beard sparkled with it. His presence in a sickroom seemed to fill it with waves of life, and his influence over the patients to whom he ministered was little short of hypnotic.

Stuart found the doctor standing at the door of his factory, shaking hands and chatting with his employees as they emerged from the building at the close of a day's work. A plain old fashioned brick structure just off the Bowery was this factory, and across the front ran a weatherbeaten sign which had not been changed for more than fifty years: "Henry Woodman, Manufacturing Chemist."

The doctor's father had established the business fifty-two years ago, and the son, who bore his father's name, had succeeded to its management on his death, which occurred just after the return of the younger man with his victorious regiment from their last campaign with Grant before Petersburg and Appomattox.

He took Stuart's hand in his big, crushing grip and handed him a letter, which he opened and read hastily:

No. 69 Gramercy Park.
Dear Sir—I must have an answer to the proposition of the American Chemical company before noon tomorrow. After that hour the matter will be definitely closed. JNO. C. CALHOUN BIVENS.
April 2, 1913.

Still looking at the letter he asked: "What does it mean?"

"An ultimatum from the chemical trust. I'll explain to you when you've seen something of my work tonight. The first hour I want you to put in with me at the dispensary."

Stuart's eye rested on the embossed heading of the letter, "No. 69 Gramercy park," and he slowly crushed the paper. It was the Primrose house, Nan's home. Her mother had succeeded.

Bivens, the new sensation in high finance, she had established as her star boarder in Stuart's absence; Bivens, his schoolmate at college; Bivens, the little razorback scion of poor white trash from the south who had suddenly become a millionaire!

His blood boiled with rage. As he turned and followed the doctor he laughed with sudden fierce determination.

The dispensary was Woodman's hobby. The old fashioned drug store stood on a corner of the Bowery, and in the rear extension, which opened on the side street, he had established what he laughingly called his "life line," a free dispensary where any man needing medicine or a doctor's advice could have it without charge if unable to pay.

For two hours Stuart saw him minister with patience and skill to the friendless and the poor; for each a cheerful word and the warm grasp of his big hand with the prescription. The young lawyer watched with curious interest the quickened step with which each one left. The medicine had begun to work before the prescription was filled.

When the last applicant had gone Stuart turned to the doctor: "And what is the proposition which the distinguished young head of the chemical trust has made you?"

"That I sell my business to them at their own valuation and come into the trust or get off the earth."

"And you wish my advice?"

"Yes." "What figure did he name?" "More than its cash value."

"Then you will accept of course?" "I would if there were not some things that can't be reckoned in terms of dollars and cents. If I take stock in the American Chemical company I am a party to their methods, an heir to their frauds."

"Yet isn't the old regime of the small manufacturer and the retailer doomed? Isn't combination the new order of modern life? Will it pay you to fight a losing battle? Bivens is not a man of broad culture, but he is a very smooth young gentleman."

"He's a contemptible little scamp!" snapped the older man. "When I took him into my drug store six years ago he didn't have a change of clothes. Now he's a millionaire. How did he get it? He stole a formula I had used to relieve nervous headaches, mixed it in water with a little poisonous coloring matter, pushed it into the soda fountain trade, made his first half million, organized the American Chemical company and blossomed into a magnate. And now this little soda fountain pip threatens me with ruin unless I join his gang and help him rob my neighbors. It happens that I like my neighbors. My business is to heal the sick, not merely to make money. Thousands of children die at my very door every summer who could be saved by a single prescription if they could get it. That's the thought that grips me when I begin to figure the profits in this trade. I'm making a fair living. I don't want any more out of my neighbors. I've shown you some of them tonight."

"I'll never forget them," Stuart broke in.

"We used to cry over Uncle Tom's woes," the doctor continued. "And yet there are more than 5,000,000 white people in America today who are the slaves of poverty, cruel and pitiless. The black slave always had food and shelter, clothes and medicine. My business is to heal the sick—mind you! Shall I give it up to exploit them?"

"But could you not use your greater wealth for greater good if you joined the trust?" the lawyer asked. "Won't they make drugs more economically than you do and drive you to the wall at last? Isn't this new law of co-operation the law of progress—in brief, the law of God?"

"That remains to be proved. I don't believe it."

"Well, I do, and I think that if you fight it will be against the stars in their courses!"

"I'm going to fight," was the firm response. "The law is on my side, isn't it?"

"The written law, yes. But you are facing a bigger question than one of statutory law."

"So I am, boy, so I am! That's why I gave you a glimpse tonight of the



world in which I live and work and dream."

"Bivens has put up to you a cold blooded business proposition?"

"Exactly. And there are things that can't be bought and sold. I am one of them!" The stalwart figure rose in simple dignity, and there was a deep tremor in his voice as he paused.

"But I'm keeping you. It's 9 o'clock and somebody's waiting—eh, boy?"

"Yes," Stuart answered apologetically. "I'm afraid I've not been of much use to you tonight."

The doctor bent closer, smiling: "I understand—of course. The angels are singing in your heart this evening the old song of life that always makes the world new and young and beautiful. And yet—it couldn't be measured in terms of barter and sale, could it?" The doctor gripped his hand tenderly in parting.

The smile died from the younger man's face, and his answer was scarcely audible: "No."

CHAPTER II.

A Lover's Quarrel.

WHEN Stuart reached the Gramercy park house a maid answered at last and ushered him into the dimly lighted parlor.

"Miss Nan is at home, Berta?" he asked eagerly.

The little Danish maid smiled knowingly: "Na, but Meenas Primrose!"

With a groan Stuart sank to a chair. The entire house had been redecorated. An oriental rug of dazzling medallion pattern was on the newly polished floor. Instead of the set of Chipendale mahogany the Primroses had brought from the south a complete outfit of stately gilded stuff filled the room, and heavy draperies to match hung from the tall windows and folding doors. The mother's velvet head he saw at once. Of course she had not borrowed the money from Bivens. She was too shrewd for that. But she had borrowed it beyond a doubt, and she had evidently gone the limit of her credit without a moment's hesitation. He wondered how far she had got with Bivens. Could it be possible that Nan was with him tonight? No—preposterous!

Mrs. Primrose greeted him with unusual effusion: "Oh, Jim, this is such a glorious surprise! Nan didn't expect you till morning, and she will be heartbroken to have missed you even for a half hour. My dear, dear boy, you have no idea how lonely both of us have been without you the past two weeks."

"You missed me, too, Mrs. Primrose?"

"Of course I missed you, Jim! You've come to be like one of us. You know I've always loved you next to Nan."

She spoke with such fervor that Stuart shivered. It was sinister. She evidently felt sure of his ruin.

"We needed you here so much to help us fix up. We've had the good luck to rent our second floor to a young millionaire!"

"Mr. Bivens, yes?"

"Why, how did you know?" she asked with a start.

"Dr. Woodman has just received an important letter from him, dated here, and he asked my advice about it."

"Oh—"

"Where's Nan?" Stuart asked, with sudden anger in spite of his effort to keep cool.

"Why, she's giving a little box party at the theater tonight!"

"And our mutual friend, John C. Calhoun Bivens, is presiding?"

"Why, Jim, how could you be so absurd?" she protested indignantly. "I've been saving money for a month to give Nan this chance to return some courtesies she has received from rich friends. I need Mr. Bivens's money to pay the rent of this big house. But any attention on his part to Nan would be disgusting to me beyond measure."

"Yet he's the sensation in high finance just now," Stuart said, with an unconscious sneer. "They say he's destined to become a multi-millionaire."

"Come, come, Jim, it's not like you to be nasty to me. You know as well as I do his origin in North Carolina. His people are the veriest trash. He was at college with you!"

"And how did you know that?"

"Not from you, of course. You've never mentioned his name in your life. He told me. He thinks you are going to be the greatest lawyer in New York. And I told him we'd known that for a long time."

Stuart turned his head to hide a smile.

"But of course he's not in Nan's social set. I told her the day he came that we would treat him politely, but draw the line strictly on any efforts he may make to pass the limits of acquaintance."

A carriage stopped at the door. "There's Nan now!" the mother exclaimed, rising to go. "I'll leave you to surprise her, Jim."

Stuart heard the carriage door slam, and in a moment the girl he loved stood in the hall, the joy of an evening's perfect happiness shining in her great dark eyes. He watched her a moment unobserved as she laid aside her opera cloak and stood before the big mirror proudly and calmly surveying her figure. Never had her beauty seemed to him so dazzling. The smile was one of conscious power. The corners of the full sensuous lips curved the slightest bit as the smile faded and a gleam of something like cruelty flashed from the depths of her eyes as her head lifted.

Stuart, unable to wait longer, was about to spring to her side when she caught the flash of his laughing face in the mirror and turned.

"Oh, you rascal! To surprise me like this!" she cried, with joyous laughter. "In all your pride and vanity!"

"You can't help being a little vain yourself, Jim, any more than I can. You know you're a stunning looking fellow. These Yankee girls all love you at first sight—the tall, straight, sinewy figure, strong and swift in every movement, the finely chiseled face, the deep set, dark brown eyes under their heavy brows, that big masterful jaw and firm mouth!"

Stuart suddenly took her in his arms and kissed her into silence.

"Hush, Nan. I don't like the way you say that."

"Why? Am I too modest?"

"No, too deliberate and coldly mistress of yourself. I wish you loved me a little more tumultuously as I do you."

"Well, let me whisper then that your return tonight has made a perfect ending to a perfect day. Oh, Jim, I've been so happy tonight! Seated in that big stage box I felt that I was somebody. This is the first really decent dress I've ever had in my life."

"And you are proud and happy?"

"Proud for your sake, Jim, yes; and happy in your love."

Stuart's face clouded and he turned away, startled for the first time by a strange similarity in the tone of Nan's voice to her mother's.

The painful impression was suddenly broken by a quick touch of Nan's hand on his arm.

"Oh, Jim, I'm glad you came a day earlier. I've something to tell you, something wonderful, something that will bring our happiness near!" Her voice sank to the tenderest accents. "You know Mr. Bivens?"

"Yes," Stuart answered evenly, controlling himself with an effort.

"Well, he has taken our second floor. I had a long talk with him last week. By the merest accident I learned that his big trust, the American Chemical company, needs another lawyer. They pay an enormous salary with all sorts of chances to get rich. They are making millions on millions. I told him that you were the very man for the place and that you were going to be the greatest lawyer in New York. Imagine my joy when he not only agreed with me, but said he would double the salary if you would accept it. He thought you wouldn't, merely because you lived in the house of old Woodman with whom the company may have a fight. I told him it was nonsense, that I knew you would accept. You'll accept, of course?"

"Emphatically no!"

"You can't be so absurd!"

hiring. You would lay the law down for them to follow."

"No. A modern corporation has no soul, and the man who serves this master must sell both body and soul for the wages he receives. I am a lawyer of the old school. My work is illumined by imagination. My business is to enforce justice in the relations of men."

"But some of the greatest lawyers in America are corporation attorneys!"

"All the reason more why I should keep clean. Lawyers once constituted our aristocracy of brain and culture. I can't prostitute my talents to a work I don't believe in. A man's work is a revelation of what he is. And what he is will depend at last on what he does."

"But you mean to be rich and powerful, Jim?"

"If it comes with the growth of manhood and character, yes. But I will not degrade myself with work I hate or take orders from men I despise. The world is already full of such slaves."

Stuart paused and laid his hand gently on the girl's white, round arm, and she turned, with a start.

"I didn't hear your last sentence, Jim."

"Of what were you thinking?"

"Of what a woman is always thinking—consciously or unconsciously, of my home—whether it shall be a hovel or a palace."

"It all depends on whether love is the builder!"

"It all depends on the man I marry," was the laughing answer. "I've always dreamed of you as a man of wealth and power. Your splendid talents mean this. When you came to New York I was more sure of you than ever. You've simply got to make money, Jim. Nothing else counts in the world today. I hate poverty—I fear it—I loathe it!"

"And yet," the lover said, drawing closer, "I hold the touch of your little finger of greater value than all the gold on the earth or beneath it."

"Don't interrupt me, please, with irrelevant remarks," Nan cried, laughing in spite of herself. "Seriously, Jim—you must listen to me. I'm in dead earnest. You must have money, if for no other reason because I wish it. I can't be happy in poverty. The man I love must be rich. Oh, Jim, you shall be! Wealth is the only road now from the vulgar crowd—the only way to climb on top."

"But suppose I don't wish to climb on the top of people?"

"You can't be such a fool!"

"But suppose I am? True civilization has always placed manhood above money."

"Jim, are you crazy?"

"It's true, dear. My father gave up his law practice to bend over my mother's bedside for six months. He was a giant in mind and body—she a poor little, broken, withered invalid. He lost money and clients and never regained them. Did it pay? Does anything that's born of love pay? Surely not children. I was always a dead expense. The biggest fee I ever received as a lawyer in New York was a shout of joy from a poor woman whose boy I freed from a false charge of crime. She fell sobbing before me and actually kissed my feet."

"Oh, Jim, why can't you be practical? Why are you not willing to fight for a fortune—as other men?"

"Because, dear," he answered quickly and tenderly, "we haven't time—you and I. Life is too short. Love is too sweet. The fields are too green."



"The man I love must be rich."

The birds sing too sweetly. Have you forgotten our old day dreams in the fields at home?"

(Continued in Friday's Issue.)

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