

# WINDS OF CHANCE

by Rex Beach

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### CHAPTER IX (Continued)

After a while her hand rose to his face and stroked it softly, then she drew herself away from him and, with a wan smile upon her lips, said: "The wind has made a fool of me."

"No, no!" he cried forcefully. "You asked me what I think of you—Well, now you know."

Still smiling, she shook her head slowly, then she told him, "Come! I hear the rain."

"But I want to talk to you. I have so much to say—"

"What is there to talk about tonight? Hark!" They could feel, rather than hear, the first warnings of the coming downpour, so hand in hand they walked up the gravelly beach and into the fringe of the forest where glowed the dull illumination from lamp-lit canvas walls. When they passed before the Countess' tent Pierce once more enfolded her in his arms and sheltered her from the holocaustic breath of the night. His emotions were in a similar tumult, but as yet he could not voice them, he could merely stammer:

"You have never told me your name."

"Hilda."

"May I—call you that?"

She nodded. "Yes—when we are alone." Hilda Halberg, that was my name.

"Hilda! Hilda—Phillips!" Pierce cried the sound curiously. The Countess drew back abruptly with a shiver; then, in answer to his quick concern, said:

"I—I think I'm cold."

He undertook to wrap her closer, but she held him off, murmuring:

"Let it be Hilda Halberg for tonight. Let's not think of—Let's not think of all. Hilda—bride of the storm. There's a tempest in my blood, and who can think with a tempest raging?"

She raised her face and kissed him upon the lips, then, disengaging herself once more from his hungry arms, she stepped inside her shelter. The last he saw of her was her luminous smile framed against the black background; then she let the tent-fly fall.

A Phillips turned away big raindrops began to drum upon the nearby tent roofs, the spruce-tops overhead bent low, limbs thrashed as the gusty night wind beat upon them. But he heard none of it, felt none of it, for in his ears rang the music of the spheres and on his face hovered the warmth of a woman's lips. The first love kiss that he had ever known.

Tom Linton roused himself from a chilly doze to find that the rain had come at last. It was a roaring night; his tent was belted in by the force of the wind, and the raindrops beat upon it with the force of bullets. Through the entrance-shut, through the open stove-pipe hole, the sleet poured, bringing dampness with it and rendering the interior as draughtily as a corn-crib. Rolling himself more tightly in his blankets, Linton addressed the darkness through chattering teeth.

"Darned old fool! This'll teach him!"

He strained his ears for sounds of Jerry, but could hear nothing above the slatting of wet canvas, the tattoo of drops, and the roar of wind in the tree-tops. After the first violence of the squall had passed he fancied he could hear his former partner stirring, so he arose

and peered out into the night. At first he could see nothing, but in time he dimly made out Jerry struggling with his tarpaulin. Evidently the fly had blown down, or up, and its owner was re-erecting it. Linton grinned. That would drench the old dodo to the skin and he'd soon be around, begging shelter.

"But I won't let him in, not if he drowns," Tom muttered harshly. He recalled one of Jerry's ruses at the saw-pit, a particularly unfeeling, nay, a downright venomous insult which had rankled steadily ever since. His former friend had seen fit to ridicule honest perspiration and to pretend to mistake it for raindrops. That remark had been utterly uncalled for and it had betrayed a wanton malice, a malevolent desire to wound; well, here was a chance to even the score. When Jerry came dripping to the tent door, Tom decided he would poke his head out into the deluge and then cry in evident astonishment: "Why, Jerry, you've been working, haven't you? You're all sweaty!" Mr. Linton giggled out loud. That would be a refinement of sarcasm that would be a get-back of the finest. If Jerry insisted upon coming in out of the wet he'd tell him gruffly to get out of there and try the lake for a change.

But Mr. Quirk made no move in the direction of the tent; instead, he built a fire in his stove and crouched over it, endeavoring vainly to shelter himself from the driving rain. Linton watched him with mingled impatience and resentment. Would the old fool never get enough? Jerry was the most unreasonable, the most tantalizing person in the world.

After a time Mr. Linton found that his teeth were chattering and that his frame had been smitten as by an ague; reluctantly he crept back into bed. He determined to buy, beg, borrow, or steal some more bedding on the morrow—early on the morrow in order to forestall Jerry. Jerry would have to find a tent somewhere, and inasmuch as there were none to be had here at Linderman, he would probably have to return to Dyea.

That would delay him seriously; enough, perhaps, so that the jaws of winter would close down upon him. Through the drone of pattering drops there came the faint sound of a cough.

Mr. Linton sat up in bed. "Pneumonia!" he exclaimed. "Well, Jerry was getting exactly what he deserved. He had called him 'Tom,' a 'dam' old fool," to be precise. The epithet in itself meant nothing—it was in fact a fatuous and feeble term of abuse as compared to the opprobrious titles which he and Jerry were in the habit of exchanging—it was that abominable adjective which hurt Jerry and he had called each other many names at times. They had exchanged numerous compliments and insults, but nothing like that hateful word "old" had ever passed between them until this fatal morning. Jerry Quirk himself was old, the oldest man in the world, perhaps, but Tom had exercised an admirable regard for his partner's feelings and had never cast it up to him. Thus had his consideration been repaid. However, the poor fellow's race was about run, for he couldn't stand cold or exposure. Why, a wet foot sent him to bed. How, then, could a sickly ruin of his antiquity withstand the ravages of pneumonia—galloping pneumonia, at that?

Linton reflected that common decency would demand that he wait over a day or two and help bury the old man—people would expect that much of him. He'd do it. He'd speak kindly of the departed; he'd even erect a cross and write an epitaph upon it—a kindly, lying epitaph extolling the dead man's virtues, and hinting all mention of his faults.

Once more that hacking cough sounded, and the listener stirred uneasily. Jerry had some virtues—a few of the common, elemental sort—he was honest, and he was brave, but for that matter, so were most people. Yes, the old accountant had nerve enough. Linton recalled, on certain days, long past, when he and Quirk had been sent out to round up some cattle-rustlers. Being the youngest deputies in the sheriff's office, the toughest jobs invariably fell to them. Those were the good, glad days, Tom reflected. Jerry had made a reputation on that trip and he had saved his companion's life—Linton flopped nervously in his bed at the memory. Wh think of days dead and gone? Jerry was an altogether different man in those times. He neither criticized nor permitted others to criticize his team-mate and, so far as that particular obligation went, Linton had repaid it with compound interest. If anything, the debt now lay on Jerry's side.

Tom tried to close the book of memories. Why think of days dead whatever except the rankling present, but now that his thoughts had begun to run backward, he could not head them off. He wished Jerry wouldn't cough; it was a distressing sound, and it disturbed his rest. Nevertheless, that hollow, hacking complaint continued and finally the listener arose. In a lantern, put on a stick and untied his tent flaps.

Jerry's stove was sizzling in the partial shelter of the canvas sheet; over it the owner crouched in an attitude of cheerless dejection.

"How you making out?" Tom inquired, gruffly. His voice was cold, his manner was both repellent and hostile.

"Who, me?" Jerry peered up from under his glistening sou-

wester. "Oh, I'm 40in' fine!"

Linton remained silent, ill at ease; water drained off his coat; his lantern flared smokily in the wind. After a time he cleared his throat and inquired:

"Well, you ain't set here all night?"

"Naw!"

There was a long pause, then the visitor inquired: "Are you lying?"

"Unh-huh!"

Again silence claimed both men until Tom broke out, irritably: "Well, you ain't set here all night?"

"Sure! I ain't sleepy. I don't mind a little mist and I'm plenty warm." This cheerful assertion was belied by the miserable quaver in which it was voiced.

"Why don't you—er—run over to my tent?" Linton guessed and swallowed hard. The invitation was out, the damage was done.

"There's lots of room."

Mr. Quirk spared his caller's further feelings by betraying no triumph whatever. Rather plaintively he declared: "I got room enough here. It ain't exactly room I need." Again he coughed.

"Here! Get a move on you, quick," Linton ordered, forcefully. "The idea of you setting around hatching out a lungful of pneumonia bugs! G! I'll bring your bedding."

Mr. Quirk rose with slacrity. "Say! Let's take my stove over to your tent and warm her up. I bet you're cold?"

"N-no! I'm comfortable enough." The speaker's teeth played an accompaniment to this mendacious denial. "Of course I'm not sweating any, but—er—'pose the stove would cheer things up, eh? Rotten night, ain't it?"

"Worst I ever saw. Rotten country, for that matter."

"You said something," Mr. Linton chattered. He nodded his head with vigor.

It was not work moving Jerry's belongings, but the transfer was finally effected; the stove was set up and a new fire started. "This done and Tom brought forth a bottle of whisky.

"Here," said he, "take a snifter, I'll do you good."

Jerry eyed the bottle with frank astonishment before he exclaimed: "Why, I didn't know you was a drinkin' man. You been hidin' a secret vice from me?"

"No. And I'm not a drinking man. I brought it along for—you—er—that cough of yours used to worry-me, so—"

"How long?"

"You take a jolt and—Linton flushed with embarrassment—and I'll have one with you. I was lying just now; I'm colder 'n a frog's belly."

"Happy days," said Quirk, as he lipped the bottle.

"A long life and a wicked one!" Linton drank in his turn. "Now then, get out of those cold compresses. Here's some dry underclothes—thick, too. We'll double up those heiskin blankets—for tonight—and I'll keep the fire a-going. I'll care that cough if I sweat you as white as a wash-woman's thumb."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Jerry declared, as he removed his sodden garments and hung them up. "You'll crawl right into bed with me, and we'll have a good sleep. You're near dead."

But Linton was by no means reassured; his tone was querulous when he cried: "Why didn't you come in before you caught cold? Spose you get sick on me now? But you won't. I won't let you." In a panic of apprehension he dug out his half of the contents of the medicine-kit and began to paw through them. "Who got the cough syrup, Jerry, or me?" The speaker's voice broke miserably.

Mr. Quirk laid a trembling hand upon his partner's shoulder; his voice, too, was shaky when he said, "You're awful good to me, Tom."

The other shook off the grasp and undertook to read the labels on the bottles, but they had become unaccountably blurred and there was a painful lump in his throat. It seemed to him that Old Jerry's bare legs looked pitifully

## Named Twice As Love Thief



Marjorie Rambour, well-known Broadway actress, for the second time in a year has been accused of stealing the love of another woman's husband. Mrs. Mabel Manton, wife of Kevin Manton, actor who has been playing opposite Miss Rambour, has filed suit for divorce, naming Miss Rambour as co-respondent, and has announced that she will sue the actress for \$100,000 besides. The two were trapped together in a bedroom. She charges. The actress says the charges are ridiculous. Miss Rambour was named a year ago in a suit filed by Blanche Yurka, against her husband, Ian Keith, also of the stage.

thin and spidery and that his bony knees had a rheumatic appearance. "Hell! I treated you mighty mean," said he. "But I must die when you began to cough. I thought sure—"

Tom choked and shook his gray head, then with the heel of his harsh palm he wiped a drop of moisture from his cheek. "Look at me—er—"

He tried to laugh and failed.

Jerry, likewise, struggled with his tears.

"You—you dam' old fool!" he cried, affectionately.

Linton smiled with delight. "Give it to me," he urged. "Lam into me, Jerry. I deserve it. Good! I was jonesin'!"

A half-hour later the two friends were lying side by side in their bed and the stove was glowing comfortably. Jerry had ceased shivering. Old Jerry had "spooned" up close to old Tom and his bodily heat was grateful.

Linton eyed the fire with tender yearning. "That's a good stove you got."

"She's a corker, ain't she?"

"I been thinking about trading you a half interest in my tent for a half interest in her."

"The trade's made." There was a moment of silence. "What'd you say we hook up together—sort of

but I got good points."

Mr. Linton smiled dreamily. "It's a go. I need a good partner."

"I'll buy a new tryin'-pan out of my money. Mine got split, somehow."

Tom chuckled. "You darned old fool!" said he.

Jerry heaved a long sigh and

snuggled closer; soon he began to snore. He snored in a low and confidential tone at first, but gradually the sound increased in volume and rose in pitch.

Linton listened to it with a thrill, and he assured himself that he had never heard music of such soul-satisfying sweetness as issued from the nostrils of his new partner.

(To be continued.)

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