

WINDS OF CHANCE

by Rex Beach

Published by Arrangement with First National Pictures, Inc., and Frank Lloyd Productions, Inc.

CHAPTER XXV. (Continued)

As time passed and Hilda continued to meet the test, her husband's satisfaction gained a keener edge. He beamed, he strutted, he twisted his mustache to needle-points. She was a thoroughbred, that he assured himself. But after all, why shouldn't she do this for him? The women with whom he was accustomed to associate would not have counted such an evening as this a sacrifice, and even had they so considered it, he was in the habit of exacting sacrifices from women; they liked it; it proved their devotion.

Her subjugation was made complete when he led her into a box at the Hilda theater and insisted upon the two McCaskeys joining them. The brothers at first declined, but by this time Courteau's determination carried all before it.

Joe halted him outside the box door, however, to inquire into the meaning of the affair.

"It means this," the Count informed him. "I have effected a complete reconciliation with my adorable wife. Women are all alike—they fear the iron, they kiss the hand that smites them. I have made her my obedient slave, my man. That's what it means."

"It don't look good to me," Joe said, morosely. "She's got an ace buried somewhere."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I've got a hunch she's sulking you, Count. She's stuck on Phillips, like I told you, and she's trying to get a peck at your hole card."

It was characteristic of Courteau that he should take instant offense at this reflection upon his sagacity.

this doubt of his ability as a charmer.

"You insult my intelligence," he cried, stiffly, "and above all, I possess intelligence. You—do not. No, you are coarse, you are gross. I am full of sentiment."

"Hate!" McCaskey growled. "I got that way myself, sometimes. Sentiment like yours costs twenty dollars a quart. But this ain't the time for a spree, we got 'business on our hands."

The Count eyed his friend with a frown. "It is a personal affair and concerns our business, not in the least, I say a revengeful person; I have pride and I exact payment from those who wound me. I brought my wife here as a punishment and I propose to make her drink with you. Your company is not agreeable at times, my friend, and she does you an honor."

"Cut out that tony talk," Joe said, roughly. "You're a Johnson, and you're trying to grab her bank-roll. Don't you s'pose I'm out? My company was all right until you got your hand in the hotel cash-drawer; now I'm coarse. Maybe she's on the square—she fell for you once—but I bet she's working you. Make sure of this, my high and mighty noble man!"

For emphasis the speaker laid a heavy hand upon the Count's shoulder and thrust his disagreeable face closer—"that you keep your mouth shut. Savvy? Don't let her sweat you."

The admonitory words ended abruptly, for the door of the box reopened and Joe found the Count, less Courteau facing him. For an instant their glances met and in her eyes the man saw an expression of comfortable remembrance of that day at Sheep Camp when she had turned public wrath upon his brother Jim's head. But the look was fleeting; she turned it upon her husband, and the Count, with an apology for his delay, entered the box, dragging McCaskey with him.

Frank, it appeared, shared his brother's suspicions; the two exchanged glances as Joe entered, then when the little party had adjusted itself to the cramped quarters they watched the Countess curiously, hoping to analyze her true intent. But in this they were unsuccessful. She treated both of them with a cool impartial formality, quite natural under the circumstances, but in no other way did she appear conscious of that clash on the Chilkoot trail. It was not a pleasant situation at best, and Joe especially was fit at ease, but Courteau continued his spend-thrift role, keeping the waiters busy, and under the influence of his potatoes the elder McCaskey soon regained some of his natural sangfroid. All three men drank liberally, and by the time the lower floor had been cleared for dancing they were in a hilarious mood. They laughed loudly, they shout-

ed greetings across to other patrons of the place, they flung coins to the whirling couples below.

Meanwhile, they forced the woman to imbibe with them. Joe, in spite of his returning confidence, kept such close watch of her that she could not spill her glass into the bucket except rarely. Hilda hated alcohol and its effects; she was not accustomed to drinking. As she felt her intoxication mounting she became fearful that the very medium upon which she had counted for success would prove to be her undoing. Desperately she latched to retain her wits. More than once, with a reckless defiance utterly foreign to her preconceived plans, she was upon the point of inquiring the bubbling contents of her glass into the flushed faces about her and telling these men how completely she was shamming. But she managed to resist the temptation, that she felt such an impulse at all made her fearful of committing some action really rash, or dropping some word that would prove fatal.

It was a hideous ordeal. She realized that already the cloak of decency, of respectability, which she had been at such pains to preserve during these difficult years, was gone, lost for good and all. She had made herself a Lady Godiva; by this night of consoling revelry she had undone every-thing. Not only had she condoned the sins and the shortcomings of her dissolute husband but also she had put herself on a level with him and the fallen women of the town—his customary associates. Courteau had done this to her. It had been his proposal. She could have throttled him where he sat.

The long night dragged on interminably. Like leeches the two McCaskeys clung to their prodigal host, and not until the early hours of morning, when the Count had become sullen, stupefied, and when they were in a condition little better, did they permit him to leave them. How Hilda got him home she scarcely knew, for she, too, had all but lost command of her senses. There were moments when she fought unavailingly against a mental numbness, a stupor that rolled upward and suffused her like a cloud of noxious vapors, leaving her knees weak, her hands clumsy, her vision blurred; again waves of deathly illness surged over her. Under and through it all, however, her subconscious will to conquer remained firm. Over and over she told herself: "I'll have the truth and then—I'll make him pay."

Courteau followed his wife into her room, and there his maudlin manner changed. He roused himself and smiled at her fatuously; into his eyes flamed a desire. Into his cheeks came a deeper flush. He pawed at her caressingly; he voiced thick, passionate protestations. Hilda had expected nothing less; it was for this that she had bled her flesh and sacrificed her spirit these many hours.

"You're—wonderful woman," the man mumbled as he awayed with her in his arms. "Got all the old charm and more. Game, too!" He laughed foolishly, then in drunken gravity asserted: "Well, I'm the man, the stronger vessel. To turn hate into love, that—"

"You've taken your price. You've had your hour," she told him. Her head was thrown back, her eyes were closed, her teeth were clenched as if in a final struggle for self-restraint.

Courteau pressed his lips to hers; then in a sudden frenzy he crushed her closer and fell to kissing her cheeks, her neck, her throat. He mistook her shoulder of abhorrence for a thrill responsive to his passion, and hiccupped:

"You've mine again, all mine, and I'm mad about you. I'm aflame. This is like the night of our marriage, what?"

"Are you satisfied, now that you've made me suffer? Do you still imagine I care for that foolish boy?"

"Phillips? Bah! A noisy swine."

Again the Count checked, but this time his movement ran away with him until he shook and until tears came to his eyes.

Without reason Hilda joined in his laughter. Together they stood rocking, giggling, snickering, as if at some exuberating jest.

"He—tried to steal you—from me. From me, imagine it! Then he struck me. Well, where is he now, eh?"

"I never dreamed that you cared enough for me to do—do what you did. To risk so much."

"Risk?"

Hilda nodded, and her loose straw-gold hair brushed Courteau's cheek. "Don't pretend any longer. I know from the start. But you were jealous. When a woman loses the power to excite jealousy it's a sign she's growing old and ugly and losing her fire. She can face anything except that."

"Fire?" Henri exclaimed. "Parbleu! Don't I know you to be a volcano?"

"How did you manage the affair last night?"

"—that fellow's ruin? It frightens me to realize that you can accomplish such things."

The Count pushed his wife away. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Oh, very well! Carry it out if you wish," she said, with a careless shrug. "But you're not fooling me in the least. On the contrary, I admire your spirit. Now then, I'm thirsty. And you are, too. With a smile she opened the cabinet, she reached for a bottle with a label she filled; the other she raised with a gesture, and Courteau blindly followed suit.

In spite of his deep intoxication the man still retained the elements of suspicion, and when she spoke of Pierre Phillips they began to glow and threatened to burst into flame. Cunningly, desperately she played upon him, however. She entered, she conquered, she enjoyed; she maddened him with her advances; she teased him with her pulses; she dragged him with her smiles, her fragrant charms. Time and again he was upon the point of surrender, but caught himself in time.

She won at last. She dragged the story from him, bit by bit, playing upon his vanity, until he gabbled boastfully and took a eruption of delight in repeating the details. It was a tale distorted and confused, but the truth was there. She made an excuse to leave him, finally, and remained out of the room for a long time. When she returned it was to find him sprawled across her bed fast asleep.

For a moment she held dizzily to the bedpost and stared down at him. Her mask had slipped now, her face was distorted with loathing, and so deep were her feelings that she could not bear to touch him, even to cover him over. Lurching him spread-eagled as he was, she staggered out of his unclean presence.

Hilda was deathly sick; objects were gyrating before her eyes; she felt a hideous nightmare sensation of unreality, and was filled with an intense contempt, a tragic disgust for herself. Pausing at the foot of the stairs, she strove to gather herself together; then slowly, passionately she cursed the name of Pierre Phillips.

By rubbing white one lit the lamp and went for a mark of ice, the other kindled a fire. These tasks accomplished, by mutual consent, but still without exchanging a word, they approached the table. From the window still Tom took a coin and balanced it upon his thumb and forefinger; then, in answer to his bleak, inquiring glance, Jerry nodded and he spanned the piece into the air. While it was still spinning Jerry looked, sharply.

"Tails!"

Both gray heads bent and nearly sightly examined the coin.

"Tails she is," Tom announced. He replaced the silver piece, crossed the room to his bunk, seated himself upon it, and remained there while Jerry, with a sudden access of cheerfulness, hustled to the stove, warmed himself, and then began culinary preparations.

These preparations were simple, but precise; also they were deliberate. Jerry cut one slice of ham, he measured out just enough coffee for one person, he opened one can of corn, and he mixed a half-pint of biscuits. Tom watched him from beneath a frown, meanwhile tugging moodily at the icicles which still clung to his tips. His corner of the cabin was cold, hence it was a painful process. When he had disposed of the last

lump and when he could not longer restrain his irritation, he looked out:

"Of course you had to make bread didn't you? Just because you know I'm starving."

"It come tails, didn't it?" Jerry inquired, with aggravating pleasantness. "It ain't my fault you're starving, and you got all night to cook what you want—after I'm done. I don't care if you bake a layer cake and freeze ice-cream. You can put your front feet in the trough and champ your swill; you can root and waller in it, for all of me. I won't hurry you, not in the least."

"It's come tails every time lately," Jerry gumbled the former speaker.

"Jerry giggled. "I always was right lucky, except in pickin' partners," he declared. In a cracked and tuneless voice he began humming a roundelay, evidently intended to express gaiety and contentment.

Unable to longer withstand his gnawing hunger, Tom secured for himself a large round handstake and with this he tried to ward off the pangs of starvation. But he had small success with the endeavor, for his teeth were poor. His tongue the thing of adamant inside,

finally, and cried, testily:

"My God! Ain't it had enough to eat a phonograph record without having to listen to the damn machine? Shut up, will you? You've got the independent singing voice I ever heard."

(To be continued)

putting on their snowshoes for the land wander ahead. Soon they will be able to go over the snow without difficulty, thanks to this arrangement with nature.

The creatures are called snowshoe rabbits, sometimes known as varying hares. Their hind feet have long, spreading toes which in winter are covered with coarse hair, giving the rear feet fully four times the area of the fore feet. This natural snowshoe enables Mr. Rabbit to travel in snow in which the ordinary bunny would flounder.

BRUCOLI CROP LARGER
ROSEBURG, Ore.—The broccoli acreage in Douglas county at the present time amounts to more than 4000 acres, according to a survey just completed by the vegetable crops committee, which is preparing its report for the agricultural economic conference to be held in this county starting November 19.

Providing normal weather and climatic conditions prevail during the winter and spring, the acreage now devoted to the production of broccoli will yield from 1600 to 2000 carloads. The largest amount ever produced previously was in 1923-24, when 223 carloads were shipped.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

Tom Linton and Jerry Quirk talked slowly up the trail toward their cabin. Both men were bundled thickly in clothing, both bewhiskered visages bore grotesque breath-masks of ice; even their eyebrows were hoary with frost. The partners were very tired.

Pausing in the chip-littered space before their door, they gazed down the trail to a mound of gravel which stood out raw and red against the universal whiteness. This mound was in the form of a truncated cone and on its level top was a windmill and a pole bucket track. From beneath the windmill issued a cloud of smoke which mounted in billows, as if breathed forth from a concealed chimney—smoke from the smothered drift fires laid against the frozen face of pay dirt forty feet below the surface. Evidently this fire was burning to suit the partners; after watching it for a moment, Tom took a buck-saw and fell stiffly to work upon a dry spruce log which lay on the saw-buck; Jerry snat on his mittens and began to split the blocks as they fell.

Darkness was close at hand, but both men were so fagged that they found it impossible to hurry. Neither did they speak. Patiently, silently they sawed and chopped, then carried the wood into the chil-

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On the Bench



Col. Harry B. Anderson is the new federal judge for the western district of Tennessee. He replaces the late Judge J. W. Ross, killed in an auto accident near Jackson, Tenn., two months ago.

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