

UNDER PRESSURE

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By George Agnew Chamberlain

WNU Service

SYNOPSIS

Joyce Sewell, on the eve of her twentieth birthday, rebels at her lot, dependent on her detested stepmother, Irma, and full of tragic memories of her mother's murder twelve years before and her father's death six months ago. Irma calls in Helm Blackadder, an admirer, to help her persuade Joyce to marry rich, young Michael Kirkpatrick. Mike, sent up to Joyce by Irma and Blackadder, demands a showdown on his proposal and is rejected. Reading her father's papers, Joyce realizes that La Barranca, a Mexican hacienda which her father had owned, legally belongs to her. Later, she receives a letter enclosing a warrant on the United States Treasury for \$10,000 compensation for her mother's murder at La Barranca. She confers with Mr. Bradley, a banker and only remaining friend of her father's. She confides that she wants to make a secret journey to Mexico.

CHAPTER II—Continued

She sat staring at the floor, not answering at once. "I know what you mean," she said finally, "and I'll try to explain. I remember everything, but I've found out that being far away from a thing like that doesn't help you to forget—it makes it into a picture on the wall. Then there's something else. Places go by contrasts, don't they? I won't say anything about Elsinboro; all I can tell you is that when I've been unhappy, when I'm most miserable, I look back and dream of happiness and La Barranca." She swept her eyes to his face. "My mother isn't here, Mr. Bradley. I mean she couldn't possibly come to Elsinboro—not even in my thoughts. Does that sound foolish to you?"

"Not foolish, my dear," he murmured, "not at all foolish."

Touched by his understanding she reached out one hand impulsively and laid it on his arm. "Oh, Mr. Bradley, please be my friend. You can help me so much! My passport, a letter of credit, but that's not all. You know my stepmother. Father used to keep telling me she's a good woman. Well, she is, but if she finds out what I'm doing or where I am I'll have two fights on my hands instead of one."

"How are you going to work it? How will you get away?"

"I've thought it all out. I can say I'm going to Frances Holder's for a visit."

"H'm. But they'll trace you. Nowadays a deliberate disappearance is one of the hardest things on earth to stage."

"I've thought of that too." She gave him a look so composed it set his blood to tingling. "If I go by air, where will I be by the time they begin their tracing?"

He blinked at her admiringly. "Joyce, I've made up my mind. I'll do everything I can to help you and I promise I'll keep my mouth tight shut till you say the word."

On the same impulse they rose to their feet and stood with right hands half extended, not quite touching. "You're awfully young, Joyce, and most people would say I ought to be jailed for letting you go. But you've got heart as well as head, and as for youth—what's it for? To spend while it's strong."

He proved as good as his word and better, for he could see a lot further ahead than Joyce. Within ten days not only did he arrange that her passport for travel abroad should come direct from the State department rather than through the local county clerk, but he coached her on her deportment in the meantime toward her stepmother, provided her with a certified copy of her father's will, warned her about excessive baggage and bought her tickets by air in a fictitious name.

Later, without detection, she boarded a plane at Elsinboro's almost deserted airport that connected at Newark with a night plane south.

CHAPTER III

Dirk Van Suttart, second secretary of embassy, would have showed to greater advantage in any other setting. The traditions of an ancient name were behind him, he had more than his share of good looks, a reasonable amount of money and a merry eye. Away from his job he was as clean-cut a young American as ever drew breath, but he was on the way to being spoiled, poisoned by the bite of the diplomatic bee.

He was engaged in testing the spring of a polo mallet when the reception clerk entered, laid Joyce's slip on the desk and lingered to smoke a cigarette. Dirk read the paper over his shoulder.

"What does she want?"

"Same old thing. She'd like to walk in on the chief."

Dirk finished testing the stick, put it away in a clothes closet, went to his padded chair and rummaged for a dispatch. "All set. You can show her in." Presently Joyce stood before him. He perused the dispatch frowningly for a moment longer, then motioned her to a chair beside the desk.

"Won't you sit down, Miss Sewell?"

Joyce hesitated. "You're not the ambassador, are you?"

"Hardly. I'm the second secretary."

"I wanted to see the ambassador."

"Are you an American?"

"Yes; born of American parents residing abroad. I arrived from the States last night. Do you wish to see my passport?"

"That's not necessary at present. I suggest you state your business. If it's something I can't handle—or if it's important enough—an appointment will be made for you with his excellency."

Joyce sat down without taking her eyes off him. She was puzzled. Here was a young man, the very antithesis of Mike Kirkpatrick in looks, manner and breeding, yet all she felt was bitter disappointment. Why? Suddenly the answer swept over her. She was face to face with the mask that had defeated her father—immature, perhaps, its veneer not yet solidified, but the same unfeeling mask.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Dirk Van Suttart," he replied, betrayed by the suddenness of the question. A glint lit in his eye and color rose to his cheeks, but he quickly controlled his anger and raised one eyebrow. "Really, Miss Sewell, while you requested a personal interview I didn't realize you were contemplating an exchange of confidences."

"I like to know to whom I am talking," said Joyce coolly. "I think you'll find my business is quite personal. I'm the daughter and sole



Anger Surged in Her Veins.

heir of the late Cutler Sewell and there's a file in this office under his name. I wish to know my rights. Am I entitled to have copies of the dispatches, or to examine them, or to be given a resume, or—if all that is impossible—can I be informed of the last step in the negotiation?"

By this time both Van Suttart's eyebrows were raised to the limit. "No copy of any dispatch can be given to anybody," he declared, "except by specific direction of the Department of State, and the same restriction applies to the balance of your question. May I ask to what this file refers?"

"To my father's property in this country."

"I thought so. Miss Sewell, Americans abroad suffer from an unfortunate delusion which you seem to share that the foreign service is maintained for their individual convenience. It isn't. It was created for the benefit of the United States as a whole and of the taxpayers at home who foot the bills. Haven't you heard of the Mexican claims commission in Washington?"

"I have."

"That, my dear young lady, is

where you should file your petition."

"I did, through my father, when I was eight years old. I'm not eight now, Mr. Van Suttart, though you seem to think so. The Mexican claims commission has been sitting for a great many years considering claims amounting to \$250,000,000. Has it settled a single case?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"You mean you don't know? I'll tell you, it hasn't—not one."

"Miss Sewell, this conversation is getting us nowhere. May I say in conclusion that I've given you all the advice—the only advice—to which you are entitled? The embassy can do nothing to help you—nothing whatever."

"Help!" exclaimed Joyce. "I didn't come here for help; I asked for certain information. Are you sure you have the authority to refuse it?"

"Quite sure."

Joyce stood up to find her knees were trembling. She had been dismissed, told to leave! Anger surged in her veins—anger against some implacable force outside herself and Van Suttart. She became a flame and suddenly its beauty cut through to his inner consciousness. In a half daze he was telling himself that if he had met this girl at a cocktail party instead of in the course of official business he would have crashed through to her side and stayed there. But he was too late, the polished shell he wore had held out too long.

"Mr. Van Suttart," said Joyce, "your imagining I came to you for help has its funny side. Aren't you ever puzzled as to why you're alive—why you draw down pay? A canary in his gilded cage earns his keep with song, but a popinjay can't even sing."

She was gone before he could wipe the look of amazement from his face, much less answer.

She hurried to the hotel where she was living, paid her bill and asked that her baggage be brought down. At sight of the petaca there were supercilious glances from the tourists, the clerk and even the porter, but not from the taxi driver; again the little native trunk served her well. He did not bother to lie about the fare and even understood her quest for the best hotel unfrequented by foreigners. Unhesitatingly he drove her to an establishment in a back street but near the center of town. The proprietor greeted her in soft Castilian and took the trouble to accompany her himself to a top-floor room.

"Can you recommend a woman lawyer?" she asked.

"I know of one, but she's a Mexican."

"I prefer a Mexican," said Joyce. "Will you give me her name and address?"

He took out his card, scribbled on it, and handed it to her. "She's a difficult person," he remarked, "but an excellent lawyer."

Joyce decided to waste no time in telephoning for an appointment, but she did stop long enough to unpack her bag and hang up her clothes. As her rage at Van Suttart began to cool she wondered at it and felt a little ashamed. Probably that manner of his had got him his job, perhaps he was paid to make people feel exactly as she had felt. She opened the petaca, sorted out the documents she thought she would need and made her way on foot to the lawyer's address.

It was a strange, old-fashioned building with a long dark narrow hall which opened suddenly upon a big square well surrounded by balconies and roofed by the sky. There was an elevator but no attendant. Rather than attempt to work the mechanism herself she walked up two flights and located a door upon which was inscribed: Lic. Margarida Fonseca.

She knocked; there was no answer. She opened the door, stepped into an empty anteroom and coughed. The door into a room beyond was open. She passed through it and stopped short. On the farther side of a littered desk, leaning back and apparently absorbed in staring through the thick wall at some vision far away, sat a woman whose appearance could be described only as leonine. One glance was enough to make her speak in English.

"What do you want?"

"A lawyer," said Joyce.

"What for? What about?"

"May I sit down?"

"Not What about?"

"An estate."

"Whose?"

"Mine. I have the documents here proving absolute title if you'll only take the trouble to look at them."

"No use. You're wasting my time. Don't waste yours or your money by going to any other lawyer. I give you that advice for nothing."

"What is your time worth?" asked Joyce, switching into Spanish. "I like you. How much would you charge to let me sit and look at you for half an hour?"

Margarida Fonseca swung around in her swivel chair, planted her elbows on the desk, her fists in her cheeks, and stared. "Cara'o! Hablas Castillano, gringuita! So, we talk Spanish! Who are you?"

"My name is Joyce Sewell. I'm the daughter of Cutler Sewell who owned—"

"Tst! Tst! Nobody owns anything. You possess, you don't own."

"Oh, but I do," protested Joyce. "I can prove it." She advanced, sat down on the edge of a chair and laid her documents on the desk. "Please let me show you."

"It's no use, my child. I've told you the truth and the whole truth. Incidentally I don't like Americans, but let me give you something else for nothing. Get out. Go back to your own country before somebody makes one bite of your pretty head."

Joyce stood up and buried her grave blue eyes in Margarida's black ones. "I'll get out, but I won't go back. I was wrong about you. I may not find a lawyer with more brains, but I'll get one who isn't a coward." She snatched up her precious documents, turned quickly and started toward the door.

"Stop!" yelled Margarida. "Nobody can say that to me! Come back and sit down. Give me the papers." She took them, spread them out but kept her puzzled eyes fixed on Joyce. Abruptly she smiled. "I thought you were out to make a play on the tender female heart but I've changed my mind. Have you any money?"

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Really! You're loose in Mexico at your age with \$10,000! We'll see the papers."

She glanced over them swiftly with odd jerks of her nose as if she were a parrot tearing the meat out of one nut after another.

"Why didn't you tell me it was La Barranca?" she asked of the blue sky.

"You didn't give me a chance," said Joyce.

Margarida turned. "I think I've found a way. It has nothing whatever to do with the courts. Come back in a week."

"That won't do," said Joyce, "it won't do at all!"

"Why not?"

"Because a week is too long!"

"You have courage, little one. Since you don't do your fighting with tears we'll go hunting together. Fortunately I care nothing what happens to you—nothing at all. Is that clearly understood?"

"Don't worry," said Joyce. "Show me the road and I'll look out for myself."

Margarida scooped up the papers, crammed a hat on her head, showed the way out and slammed the door behind them. A moment later they were in a taxi which scurried along interminable back streets to draw up in exactly 15 minutes at the residence of Gen. Zacharias Onelia, right-hand man to the minister of war.

"General, it is very good of you to receive us," said Margarida. "Do you mind taking a look at this young lady before she goes out to walk around the patio while you and I have a talk? She has a peculiar value, General."

"To me?"

"Especially to you," said Margarida and turned to Joyce. "Suppose you go out, chica, and stay out till you're called!" As soon as Joyce had gone Margarida leaned toward Onelia and continued in a low voice. "General, this is a momentous business, far deeper than may appear at first glance. The young lady, Miss Joyce Sewell, is undoubtedly the lawful owner of hacienda La Barranca."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Our Presidents

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