

# THE ROOT OF EVIL

BY THOMAS DIXON



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### CHAPTER III.

Mr. Bivens Calls.

STUART waked next morning with a sense of hopeless depression. What strange madness had come over the woman? They had never discussed before. Bivens was the only one on the hall rack which sent by a messenger. He saw Bivens asking him to call the telephone at 11 o'clock. He went into tiny places, into the parlor and threw them on the grate. Some one was playing a faded southern melody, a tender voice accompanied. He walked to the door of the room. Harriet Woodman. She looked with a start. "Jim, I didn't know you were here." "Beautiful, little pal." "I know you'd like that piece. I'm humming it one day. That's not it." "A sweet voice you have, child, so deep and rich and full of melody. I didn't know you could sing." "I can't either until I tried." "You must study music," he said, enthusiastically. "I'll do my level best. I'm off to my office on lower Broadway." "I rang Bivens' telephone, and the president of the American Chemical company made an engagement to me." "I was grateful for the timely call of a client who kept him in company for fifteen minutes while Bivens patiently waited his turn in the waiting room." "My first view of Bivens was always impressive. He was short, thin and almost frail at first glance. A look gave the impression of a reserve force in his compact body. His hair was jet black and slightly on top, which gave the appearance of much greater than he could really claim. His features were regular, and his eyes were covered with a thick black which he kept trimmed to a point on the chin. His most striking features were a high massive forehead, abnormally long for the size of his body, and a pair of piercing, bead-black eyes. "I rarely spoke except to a purpose. His manners were quiet, almost reserved. He had thus early in life gained a nickname that was particularly significant in Wall street. He was known as the Weasel. "His whole makeup, physical and mental, was curiously complex, a mixture of shrewdness and greed, piety and cruelty, and an indomitable will. "His friendship for Stuart and his devotion to him personally and socially from their boyhood in North Carolina, and particularly from an incident which occurred in their college days. Bivens' father had been a non-combatant in the Confederate army and had at last deserted the service. Bivens' arrival at college, a particularly green freshman, Stuart had discovered a group of his classmates hazarding him. They had forced the coward to mount a box and repeat to the crowd the funny stories about the father of his father. The boy, seared out of his wits, stood stammering and perspiring and choking with shame as he tried to obey his tormenter's commands, in which he was compelled to thrash the ring-leader and rescue the victim by force of arms. From that day Stuart was Bivens' beautiful friend. He had tolerated Bivens' father than enjoyed this friendship. Bivens shook hands quietly and took a seat beside Stuart's desk. "Well," said the lawyer at length. "I've come to make you an important proposition, Jim. We need another attorney. The business of the company is increasing so rapidly our force can't handle it. I need a big man close to the office. If you'll take the place I'll give you a salary that will ultimately be as high as the president gets in the White

house. Twenty thousand to start with." "Stuart looked at his visitor curiously. "Why do you want me, Cal? There are thousands of lawyers here who would jump at the chance. Many of them are better equipped than I." "Because I know that you won't lie to me, you won't swindle or take advantage of me." "Why not?" Stuart asked, with a smile. "Because it's not in you." "I see. You want to capitalize my character and use me to ambush the other fellow?" "That's one way to look at it—yes." "But that's not the real reason you come to me today with this proposition, is it?" "Not the only one. You know my friendship for you is genuine. You know there's not a man in New York for whom I'd do as much as I will for you if you'll let me. Isn't that true?" "I believe it—yes. And yet there must be another reason. You're not afraid of Woodman and wish to reach him through me?" "The ghost of a smile flitted around the shining little black eyes. "Afraid?" he asked contemptuously. "I'm not even interested in him. The old fossil's a joke. He thinks he can stop the progress of the world to attend a case of measles in Mott street." "Stuart was silent a moment, watching the dark masked face before him. At last he blurted out: "Well, Cal, what's the real reason you make me this offer today?" "You can keep a little secret?" "You ought to know that before making me such an offer." "Yes—yes, of course. I know you will." Bivens paused and resumed his cigar. "The fact is—Jim—I'm in love." "But where do I come into this affair?" "Simple enough. The Primroses—" "Oh, it's Miss Primrose?" "Yes—Miss Nan. You see, they think the world of you. She said you grew up together in the same town. I was telling her about my business. I must have been bragging about what we were going to do. I was crazy, just looking at her. Her beauty made me drunk. I told her we needed a new attorney. She said you were the man. I told her I'd offer you the place. She seemed pleased. Said she knew you would accept. You've got to accept, old man. I want to make her feel that her word is law with me. Tell me, do you think I've got a chance with a girl like that? You know I've never gone with girls much. I'm timid and awkward. I don't know what to do or what to say. But my money will help, won't it?" "Money always helps in this town, Cal." "And it means so much to a woman, too, don't it?" "Yes. Have you said anything to Miss Nan yet?" "Lord, no! Haven't dared. I'm kinder shy up to the old lady to get her on my side. She seems awfully friendly. I think she likes me. Don't you think it a good plan to cultivate her?" "By all means," was the dry reply. "Say, Jim, help me. Take this attorneyship. It will please her and I'll make you rich. Come in with me and you'll never regret it. I know my folks were not your social equals in the old days down south. But you know as well as I do that money talks here." "There was no mistaking the genuineness of Bivens' feelings. Stuart had but to accept the generous offer made in good faith, and every cloud between him and Nan would vanish! They could be married at once and the future was secure. All he had to do was to keep silent for the moment as to his real relations to Nan and compromise his sense of honor by accepting the wages of a man whose principles he despised. His decision was made without a moment's hesitation. "I refuse the offer, Cal," he said firmly. "Bivens rose quickly and placed his smooth hand on his friend's shoulder. "I won't take that answer now. Think it over. I'll see you again." He turned and left the room before Stuart could reply. "The lawyer drew a photograph from his desk and looked at it, smiling tenderly. "I wonder, Nan! I wonder!" The smile slowly faded, and a frown clouded his brow. The lines of his mouth suddenly tightened. "I'll settle it today," he said with decision, as he rose, took his hat and left

for Gramercy park. "It was noon when Stuart reached the Primrose house, and Nan was again out. He received the announcement from her mother with a feeling of rage he could ill conceal. "Where is she? I seem never to be able to find her at home." "Now, don't be absurd, Jim. You know she would have broken any engagement to see you had she known you were going to call today. I don't expect her home until 7." "Of course, I understand, Mrs. Primrose," Stuart said with a light laugh. "I should have told her, but I didn't know until a few moments ago that I was coming." "Nothing serious has happened, I hope?" she asked, with carefully modulated sympathy, which said plainly that she hoped for the worst. "No. Just say that I'll call after dinner." "All right, Jim, dear," the mother purred. "I'll see that she's here if I have to lock the door." Stuart strolled out aimlessly and began to ramble without purpose. Somehow today everything on which his eye rested and every sound that struck his ear proclaimed the advent of the trust's new power of which Bivens was the symbol—Bivens with his delicate, careful little hand, his bulging forehead, his dark keen eyes. What chance had his old friend Woodman against such forces? "That Bivens should fall hopelessly and blindly in love with Nan at first sight was too stupefying to be grasped at once. She couldn't love such a man—and yet his millions and that slippery mother were a sinister combination. "By evening he had thrown off his depression and met Nan with something of his old gaiety, to which she responded with a touch of coquetry. "Tell me, Jim," she began with a smile of mischief in her eyes, "why you called at the remarkable hour of 12 noon today? Am I becoming so restless that work no longer has any charms? You must have something very important to say?" "Yes. I have, Nan," he answered soberly, taking her hand. "I want a public announcement of our engagement in tomorrow morning's papers." "But why? You know the one concession, the only one I have ever made to my mother's hostility to you, is that our engagement shall be kept secret until we are ready to marry. We must play fair." "I will. We are ready now." "Nan's voice broke into a ripple of laughter. "Oh, are we? I didn't know it." "Yes, that's what I came to tell you," Stuart went on, catching her spirit of fun and pressing her hand. "I've arranged a little trip to the country tomorrow, and I'm going to convince you before we return. Make the announcement tonight, dear! On my honor I promise to convince you tomorrow that we are ready. I've an argument that never fails—an argument no woman can resist." "Not tonight, Jim," was the laughing reply. "Can't you trust me when I tell you that I've discovered something today that makes it necessary? I have seen Mr. Bivens." "Nan leaped to her feet, her face flushed, her voice ringing with triumph. "And you did what I asked you. Oh, you're a darling! Why did you tease me so last night? You accepted his offer?" "I'm sorry to disappoint you, dear, but I did not." "The girl dropped into her seat, with a sigh, while he went on: "Bivens further confided in me to the fact that he is hopelessly and desperately in love with you." "A flash of anger mantled Nan's cheeks. "That will do, Jim," she said in quiet cold tones. "Your joke has gone far enough." "Joke! Do you think I could joke on such a subject?" "A smile began to play about the corners of the full lips. "I never dreamed he was so easy." Still smiling dreamily Nan crossed her hands over her knees and studied the pattern in the rug, ignoring the presence of her lover. "Let's not joke, Nan. It's too serious." "Serious! I fail to see it." "Can't you see that we must at once announce our engagement?" "The girl's lips curled with the faintest suggestion of sarcasm. "I don't see it at all. You may be a good lawyer, but I fail to follow your logic." Stuart rose, with a gesture of anger. "Come to the point, Nan. Let's not beat the devil around the stump any longer. You know as well as I do that you've been trying to flirt with this little insect. You know in your heart of hearts you despise Bivens." "On the contrary, I vastly admire him. The man who can enter with his handclasp this big, heartless city and successfully smash the giants who oppose him is not an insect. I'd rather call him a hero. All women admire success." "It's disgusting!" "Nan fixed her dark eyes on Stuart. "How dare you use such a word to me?" "Because it's true, and you know it." "True or false, you can't say it"—she rose deliberately—"you may go now." "Forgive me, dear," Stuart stammered in a queer, muffled voice. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I was mad with jealousy." "You may go," was the hard, even answer. "I can't go like this, dearest," he pleaded. "You must forgive me—you must! Look at me!" She turned slowly, stared him full in

the face for a moment without the quiver of an eyelid, her fine figure tense, erect, cold, as she quietly said: "You are tiring me, Jim." "For the first time he saw a cold blooded calculation behind her beautiful eyes and felt it in the smile which showed the white teeth—the smile of a woman who would pause at nothing to get what she wanted. "A blush of shame tinged his face as he tremblingly said: "Please, dear, let's not part like this! I've suffered enough today. You're only teasing me. And I've acted like a fool. Say that you forgive me!" "Our engagement is at an end, Mr. Stuart," was the quiet answer. "Nan"— "Before he could recover from the shock or utter a protest she opened the door and he had passed out into the night. "CHAPTER IV. The Forgotten Man. "THE next day Stuart called a messenger and sent a note to Nan asking her to forget the ugly memory of the night before and fulfill her promise to go to the country when the rain ceased. If it continued to rain he would call at 8. He told the boy to wait for an answer. The messenger returned promptly and handed back his note unopened. "Of course she was bluffing. She knew she had the whip hand for the moment and meant to use it. "Well, two can play this game," he muttered. "We'll see who wins!" He turned to his work with grim resolution. "For two weeks the battle between pride and love raged in silence. Each day he rose with the hope of some sign from Nan, and each day hope died in a more desperate and sullen despair. At last he began to question the wisdom of his course. Should he not fight his battle at closer range? What if he were in reality engaged in a mortal combat with Bivens' millions for Nan's soul and body? The idea was too hideous to be thinkable. "And yet the more he thought of the scene of their parting, the more sickeningly became the conviction that her anger at his use of an ugly word was merely a subterfuge to break their engagement. The perfidy and cruelty of such an act was too hideous for belief—yet if the thing were possible! "One evening he made up his mind to go at once and fight for his old place beside her on any terms she would grant. He seized his hat and opened the door. To his amazement Bivens was leisurely ascending the steps. Stuart stepped into the parlor and sat down with resignation to await his entrance. "To his amazement he heard the maid say: "This way, sir. Dr. Woodman asks you to wait for him in the library." "So Bivens was calling on his arch enemy by appointment. Stuart replaced his hat on the rack and returned to his room, determined to await the outcome of this extraordinary visit. "On Dr. Woodman's entrance Bivens rose to greet him with unusual animation and unmistakable good will. When the doctor grasped the outstretched hand a more striking contrast could scarcely be imagined—the one big, bluff, jovial, sunny, powerful and straight of figure as he was always straight in speech and manners, the financier small and weak in body, his movements sinuous, flexible, with eyes that never looked at the man he was talking to, yet always seemed to be taking in everything in the room. "Well, Bivens, what can I do for you? I understand from your note that the matter is important." "Of the gravest importance to us both, doctor," he answered, with a smile. "For a peculiar personal reason I want us to get together and settle our differences." "Are there any differences between us? You go your way, and I go mine. You run your business to suit yourself, and I'll do the same. The world's big enough for us both." "That's just the trouble," Bivens interrupted. "It isn't. We are entering a new era of combination, merger, co-operation." "Compulsory co-operation?" the doctor laughed. "It may be so at last," the little man said soberly. "Certainly the old idea of competition is played out. We no longer believe that business men should try to cut each other's throats." "Oh, I see!" sneered the doctor. "They should get together, corral their customers and cut their throats." "You must recognize the fact that the drug trade is a business enterprise, not a charity organization." "Even so, still I happen to know that within a stone's throw of my store swarms a population of a quarter of a million human beings so poor that only 300 of them ever have access to a bathroom. You ask me to enter with you into a criminal conspiracy to suppress freedom of trade and use fraud and violence if necessary to win?" "Fraud and violence?" Bivens interrupted, smilingly. "Certainly. What sort of merchandise does the 'organizer' of modern industry bring to market? Tricks and subterfuges in the form of printed paper called stocks, which represent no value. From the moment a financier once tastes this blood he becomes a beast." (To be Continued)

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