

THE ROOT OF EVIL

BY THOMAS DIXON



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"Come, come, doctor, you must realize the fact that in the drug business we are bringing order out of chaos by last putting the trade on a pay-basis."

"But at what a price! You have closed mills instead of opening them, sent out of work thousands, lowered the price paid for raw material, brought ruin to its producers, increased the price charged for your products to the ruin of the consumer, and saddled millions of fictitious debts on the backs of their children yet unborn. The price of living has been increased steadily with the organization of industry into a trust. Where will it end?"

"The doctor's eyes narrowed to the merest slits of concentrated light, while an enigmatic smile played about them. The trust is here to stay, doctor. Opposition against it is as absurd and as a movement to stop the tides cannot make economy a crime, or a misdemeanor, or efficiency any! If so, you can destroy the trust."

"It is not clear yet how it is to be done," was the passionate answer, "as sure as God lives we are going to do something. At present we are the wreckers in charge of organizing and famine producers in charge of production. It can't last. I believe in the republic. For the moment the republic is asleep. But time is slowly passing the issue that will move the laggard. We are beginning dimly

Bivens merely shrugged his shoulders and answered in measured, careful tones:

"Then I suppose I'll have to fight you whether I wish it or not?"

"Yes, and you know that before you came here tonight. You have heard that I am beginning a suit for damages against your company?"

Bivens laughed in spite of himself, bit his lips and looked at the doctor.

"I assure you I had heard nothing of such a suit, and now that I have it does not even interest me."

"Then may I ask the real reason for this urgent call?"

"You may," was the cheerful response. "And I will answer frankly, I am engaged to be married to Miss Nan Primrose. The wedding is to occur in a few weeks. In some way she has learned of a possible conflict between your interests and mine and asked me to settle them."

"And, may I ask, why? I don't even know Miss Primrose."

"A woman's whim perhaps. Possibly because our mutual friend, Mr. Stuart, lives in your home, and she feared to lose his friendship in the conflict which might ensue."

The doctor was silent a moment and glared angrily at his visitor.

"Bivens, you're a liar!" he cried in a sudden burst of rage.

"I am your guest, doctor."

"I beg your pardon. I forgot myself."

"I assure you," the little financier continued smoothly, "that my intentions were friendly and generous. My only desire was to help you and make you rich."

Again the doctor's eyes blazed with wrath, and he completely lost his self-control.

"Dash you! Have I asked for your help or patronage? Its offer is an insult. I want you to remember, sir, that I picked you up out of the streets of New York ill, hungry, out of work, friendless, and gave you your first job."

Bivens, breathing heavily, turned, his face black with hate, and slowly said:

"I'll make you live to regret this interview, Woodman."

With a contemptuous grunt the doctor closed the door.

When Stuart heard the door close and Bivens' step die away on the pavement below he came down to see the doctor, haunted by a strange vision. From every shadow he saw Nan's face looking into his. He was not superstitious. This impression he knew was simply a picture burned into his tired brain by days and nights of intense longing. It was the ghost of Nan's face—old, white, pulseless, terrible in its beauty, but dead.

He paused in the lower hall and watched for a moment a scene between father and daughter through the open door of the library.

Harriet had just bounded into the room and stood beside the doctor's chair with an arm around his neck and the other hand gently smoothing his soft gray hair. She was crooning over his tired figure with the quaintest little mother touches.

"You look so worn out, papa, dear. What have you been doing?"

"Something very foolish, I'm afraid, baby—I've just refused a fortune that might have been yours some day."

"Why did you refuse it?"

"Because I didn't believe it was clean and honest."

"Then I shouldn't want it. I'd rather be poor."

The big hands drew the golden head closer still and pressed a kiss on the young forehead.

"My husband will love me, won't he? I shall not mind if I'm poor," she went on laughing as Stuart entered the room.

"See, boy, how's she growing, this little baby of mine?" the doctor exclaimed, wheeling her about for Stuart's inspection. "Run now, girlie, and go to bed. I want to talk to Jim."

"Well, my boy," said the doctor when she had left, "I've just done a thing which I know was inevitable, but now that it's done I'm afraid I may have made a tragic mistake. Tell me if it's so. There may be time to retract."

"Bivens has threatened to ruin your business?"

"On the other hand he has just offered to buy it at my own price."

"And you refused?"

"To sell at any price, but it's not too late to change my mind. I can call him back now and apologize for my rudeness. Tell me, should I do it? Your eyes are young, boy; your soul is



"The trust is here to stay,"

...that there is something more serious in our life than the mere accumulation of national wealth—the spirit of freedom and initiative in our people. Shall they become merely the men of a few moneyed kings? Or the avenues of industry and financial enterprise remain open to children? The people will answer these questions!"

...gave a cynical little chuckle. "I'm sure we'll get the wrong of doctor," was the response.

...will get it right by and by. Education is young. You say you believe in God. Well, see to it—a thousand years are but a day to him! In the shadows of eternity he is looking at your follies. Nature in her slow, patient process is always on the side of justice."

...rose with a movement of impatience.

...sorry you can't see your way out to any proposition from me. I'm a practical man. I wish to incorporate your business into the organization of the American coal company on terms that will suit you."

...ch terms can't be made, Bivens," the doctor said impetuously. "Your aim is to squeeze money out of the last dollar the trade will give. That is your motto. I simply refuse. To you the city is merely a big sheep to be sheared, while to my neighbors—these hurrying men who pass me daily. Because they are my neighbors they are my equals. Their rights are sacred. I will not maim or kill them, and I will not fight them against those who would."

fresh from God's heart. I'm just a little lonely and afraid tonight. See things for me—sit down a moment."

"There are several reasons why you couldn't have a more sympathetic listener tonight, doctor—go on."

"Grant all their claims," he began impatiently, "for the trust—its economy, its efficiency, its power, its success—this is a free country, isn't it?"

"Theoretically."

"Well, when I hint at such a thing to your modern organizing friend that these enormous profits for the few must be paid out of the poverty of the many—against whom the strong and cunning are thus combining—a simple answer is always ready. 'Business is business,' which translated is the old cry that the first murderer shrieked into the face of his questioner, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' I saw murder in those black bead eyes of Bivens' tonight. Do you think he would hesitate to close a factory to increase a dividend if he knew that act would result in the death of its employees from weakness and hunger? Not for a minute. He hesitates only at a violation of the letter of the criminal code."

"But if you sell your business to these men and retire will you necessarily share in their wrongdoing?"

"In a very real and tragic sense, yes. I'm a coward. I give up the fight. I've been both a soldier and a merchant. Why should not trade have its heroes as well as war? Why shouldn't I be just as ready to die as a merchant for my people as I was on the field of battle? I am just passing through this world once. There are some things I simply must do as I pass. They can't wait, and the thing that has begun to strangle me is this modern craze for money, money, money, at all hazards, by fair or foul means. I must fight it. I must. Good food, decent clothes, a home, pure air, a great love—these are all any human being needs. No human being should have less. I will not strike down my fellow man to get more for myself while one human being on this earth wants as much."

"You'll never know," Stuart said, with deep emotion, "how much I owe to you in my own life. You have always been an inspiration to me."

The patient gray eyes smiled.

"I'm glad to hear that tonight, my boy, for, strange as it may seem to you, I've been whistling to keep up my courage. I've a sickening foreboding of failure. But, after all, can a man fall who is right?"

"I don't believe it," was the ringing answer which leaped to Stuart's lips. "I've had to face a crisis like this recently. I was beginning to hesitate and think of a compromise. You've helped me."

"Good luck, my boy," was the cheery answer. "I was a poor soldier tonight myself until the little weasel told me an obvious lie, and I took courage. He pretended to have come in a mood of generosity, his offer of settlement inspired by love."

"The devil must have laughed."

"So did I—especially when he told me that he was engaged to be married."

"Engaged—to-be-married?" Stuart made a supreme effort to appear indifferent. "To whom?"

"To Miss Nan Primrose, a young lady I haven't the honor of knowing, and he had the lying audacity to say that he came at her suggestion."

Stuart tried to speak and his tongue refused to move. In a stupor of blind despair he slowly fumbled his way up to his room, entered and threw himself across the bed without undressing. It was one thing to preach, another to face the thing itself alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER V.

Struggle.

THE longer Stuart wrestled with the problem of Nan's yielding to the lure of Bivens' gold the more hideous and hopeless it became. He began to feel that he had been to blame. Why had he allowed the foolish pride of a lovers' quarrel to keep them apart for two weeks?

When he came downstairs he paused at the door. Harriet was playing and singing again, and the soft tones of her voice were healing. He walked gently to the door of the music room, leaned against the panel and watched and listened.

At last she stopped reluctantly, tipped her golden head sideways in a coquettish little triumphant movement and in the quaintest imitation of a man's voice said:

"I congratulate you, Miss Harriet—I like that very much!"

"Do you, professor? Oh, I'm so glad to please you!"

She shook her curls with genuine delight and played out the little dialogue with vivid imaginary touches.

Stuart laughed.

The girl leaped to her feet, blushing scarlet, rushed to his side and seized his hand.

"Did you see me, Jim? Was I very foolish?"

"Certainly not. I quite agree with the professor. You will some day sing before kings and queens, little girl."

He left her waving and smiling to him from the steps. He walked with new vigor and a deepening sense of gratitude to her. His breath deepened, and his step grew firm and swift. He would fight for his own. He would go straight to Nan and laugh at this announcement. He would compel her to hear him. It was an absurd hour to call, but all the better.

Mrs. Primrose's greeting was so cordial, so genuinely friendly, that for a moment he was puzzled. Could it be possible he had misjudged her?

She pressed his hand warmly and lingeringly.

"Oh, Jim, I'm so glad you've come! Why have you stayed away so long? It was so foolish of you. You gave up without a struggle. I'm shocked be-

yond measure at Nan. I told her that his millions would never bring happiness unless her heart went with them—that her love for you was a thing she couldn't lay aside as a cloak she had worn. I told Nan the day she promised to marry Mr. Bivens that you were worth a dozen such men, no matter how many millions he had. You have always been my choice—you know that."

Stuart could control himself no longer. He rose and faced Mrs. Primrose with a look which brought her eloquence to an abrupt end.

"Mrs. Primrose, for once in my life I am going to tell you the truth. You have always been my bitterest foe. You brought Nan to New York to get her away from me."

The mother's eyes blazed with honest wrath.

"Yes, I did; and I'm glad I did it—you ungrateful wretch!"

"And you have always been busy poisoning her mind against me and corrupting her imagination with dreams of a life of luxury."

"And, thank God, I've succeeded at last in bringing her to her senses in time to save her from throwing herself away on you, Jim Stuart!"

As Mrs. Primrose left Nan quietly entered the room. Her face was set for battle in a proud defiant smile. She was totally unprepared for the way in which Stuart met her.

With a quick step he was at her side, seized both her hands in a grip of fierce tenderness and in low tones of vibrant passion said:

"This thing don't go with me, Nan. I won't accept it. I'm going to fight—fight for my own—for you are mine—mine by every law of God and man, and you are worth fighting for!"

The hard smile of defiance melted from the beautiful face, and a flush of tenderness slowly overspread her cheeks. It was sweet to be loved like that by a strong, masterful man. She started to speak, and he raised his hand.

"I know, dear, you said our engagement was broken. I don't believe you mean it. I couldn't. The news of your engagement to Bivens came as a bolt out of the blue sky. I refuse to accept such an act as final. You did it out of pique. You don't mean it. You can't mean it! I told you the other day I had a surprise for you. I have. It's worth a day. You promised me one in the country before our foolish quarrel. I want it now. You will come?"

She hesitated a moment and said:

"Yes."

Within an hour they had reached the hills overlooking Gravesend bay, and the magnificent sweep of water below the Narrows. Nan had scarcely spoken on the way, answering Stuart's questions in friendly nods, smiles and monosyllables.

"Before we go farther," Stuart said when they had left the car, "I want to show you a model home a friend of mine has built out here. It's my ideal, and I think you'll like it."

As they entered the gate, half hidden in the hedge, the girl exclaimed:

"What a lovely little place!"

A gardener who was watering some flowers on a sign from Stuart hastened up the gravel walk and opened the door.

Every window commanded entrancing views of the bay and ocean. Every ship entering or leaving the harbor of New York must pass close and could be seen for miles going to sea.

When Stuart finally led Nan out on the broad veranda of the second floor she was in a flutter of excitement over the perfection of its details.

"I think it's wonderful, Jim!" she exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "I've



"I think it wonderful, Jim!"

never seen anything more nearly perfect. Whose is it?"

Stuart looked into her dark eyes with desperate yearning.

"It's yours, Nan!"

"Mine?"

"Yes, dear; this is my secret. I've been building this home for you the past year. I've put all the little money my father gave me with every dollar I could save. It's paid for, and here's the key. I meant to ask you out here to fix our wedding day. I ask you now. Forget the nightmare of the past two weeks, and remember only that we love each other."

Her lips quivered for just an instant, and her hand gripped the rail of the veranda.

(To be Continued)

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