

THE ROOT OF EVIL

BY THOMAS DIXON



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dressed. He had transferred it to his evening suit. His hand closed over the ivory handle with a sudden fierce joy.

"Yes, I'll kill him in his magnificent ballroom, to the strains of his own music!" he said, half aloud. "I'll give a fit climax to his dance of death and the worm."

He quickly descended the stairs and saw Bivens talking with his wife. He didn't wish to kill him in her presence, and as he passed a look of hatred flashed from the little black eyes of the millionaire. He made up his mind to kill him at the moment the dance was at the highest pitch of gaiety.

The music began, and the dancers once more whirled into the center of the room and the crowd filled the space under the grand arch which led into the hall. Bivens was the center of an admiring group of sycophants and worshipful snobs. The doctor's heart gave a mad throb of joy. His hour had come.

With quick strides he covered the space which separated them and without a moment's hesitation thrust his hand into his breast for his revolver. Not a muscle or nerve quivered. His finger touched the trigger softly and he gave Bivens a look which he meant

The doctor laughed again in his face. "More than I can possibly tell you." Bivens followed to the door and watched him slowly walk down the steps.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE two weeks which followed the Bivens ball were the happiest Harriet Woodman had known since Nan's shadow had fallen across her life. Every moment was crowded with the work of preparing for her trip, except the hours she could not refuse Stuart, who had suddenly waked to the fact that something beautiful was going out of his life.

Harriet watched him with keen joy and deep in her heart a secret hope began to grow slowly.

The day she sailed he refused to go with her to the pier.

"Why, Jim, you must come with me!" she protested.

"No, I can't, little pal. Goodby."

He watched the cab roll down Fourth street toward the pier while a great wave of loneliness overwhelmed him.

At night the doctor was not at home. Stuart rapped on his door next morning and got no answer. The girl said he had spent the night out—she didn't know where.

As Stuart was about to leave for his office the doctor entered. His bloodshot eyes were sunken deep behind his brows, his face haggard and his shoulders drooped. Stuart knew he had tramped the streets all night in a stupor of hopeless misery.

Stuart took his outstretched hand and led him into the library. "I know why you tramped the streets; the old house is very lonely."

"I never knew what loneliness meant before!" The big hand fell in a gesture of despair.

Stuart pressed his hand.

"I understand, I'm younger than you, doctor, but I, too, have walked that way alone. You're all in; you must go to bed and sleep."

When Stuart returned early from his work in the afternoon he found a group of forlorn women and children standing beside the stoop. A pale, elfish looking boy of ten, whose face appeared to be five years older, sat on the lower step crying.

"What's the matter, kiddie?" he asked kindly.

"I wants de doctor—me mudder's sick. She'll croak before mornin' ef he don't come—dey all wants him." He waved his dirty little hand toward the others. "He ain't come around no more for a week. The goll says we can't see him—he's asleep."

"I'll tell him you're here." The doctor's been ill himself.

He urged the doctor to go at once to see his patients. The work he loved would restore his spirits. He was dumfounded at the answer he received.

"No, no! I'm in no mood to work. I couldn't help them. I'd poison and kill them all, feeling as I do today. A physician can't heal the sick unless there's healing in his own soul. I'd bring death, not life, into their homes. Tell them to go away!"

Stuart emptied his pockets of all the money he had in a desperate effort to break their disappointment.

"The doctor's too ill to see you now," he explained. "He sent this money for you and hopes it will help you over the worst until he can come."

He divided the money among them, and they looked at it with dull disappointment. They were glad to get it, but what they needed more than money was the hope and strength of their friend's presence.



His Finger Touched the Trigger Softly.

he should take with him into eternity, when just beyond him he saw Harriet. She stood motionless with a look of mute agony on her fair young face, watching Stuart talk to Bivens' wife.

His finger slipped from the trigger, and his hand loosed its deadly grip.

"Have I forgotten my baby?" he cried in sudden anguish. And then another vision flashed through his excited brain: a courtroom, a prisoner, his own bowed figure the center of a thousand eyes while the jury brought in their verdict.

His breath came in labored gasps as one mad thought succeeded another.

"No," he said hoarsely. "I must save her. I must be cunning. I must succeed—not fail. I must get what I came here for. I must save my baby. My own fate is of no importance. She is everything."

Bivens had taken from him by fraud his formula, destroyed his business and robbed him of all he possessed. The law gave him power to hold it. He, too, would appeal to the same power and take what belonged to him. No matter how, he would take it, and he would take it tonight.

Bivens had boasted that his favors in jewelry would be worth \$25,000.

The doctor turned quickly and began to search the house until he found the half drunken servant arranging these packages under the direction of a secretary. These favors had been made for the occasion by a famous jeweler—a gold death's head with diamond teeth and eyes surmounted by a butterfly and a caterpillar. The stones in each piece were worth \$100. They lay on a table in little open jewel boxes, fifty in a box, and each box contained \$5,000 worth of gold and precious stones.

The doctor inspected the boxes with exclamations of wonder and admiration. He bent low over the table for an instant, and when he left one of the jewel cases rested securely in his pocket.

He was amazed at his own skill and a thrill of fierce triumph filled his being as he realized that he had succeeded and that his little girl would go to Europe and complete her work. He spoke pleasantly to the secretary and congratulating him on his good fortune in securing such a master, turned and strolled leisurely back to the ballroom.

Not for a moment did he doubt the safety of his act. He was a chemist and knew the secret of the laboratory. He would melt the gold into a single bar and sell the diamonds as he needed them. His only regret was that he could not have taken the full amount he had demanded of the little scoundrel. He found Harriet and they started at once for home.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, when I could forget the pain in my heart. You succeeded? It's all right? I'm going abroad at once to study?"

The doctor laughed aloud in a burst of fierce joy.

"Certainly, my dear!"

The tears sprang into the gentle eyes as she answered gratefully.

"You can't know how happy you've made me."

Bivens, who had heard the doctor's laughter, passed and said with exaggerated courtesy:

"I trust you have enjoyed the evening, Woodman?"

A burst of applause swept the crowd. Nan's radiant figure passed, encircled by the arm of the leader. Stuart nodded and clapped his hands with enthusiasm.

A more marvelous transformation scene could scarcely be imagined.

When Nan had passed he turned to speak to Harriet, but she had gone. A soft hand was suddenly laid on his arm, and he turned to confront Nan, her eyes flashing with triumph, her cheeks flushed and her lips parted in a tender smile.

"Come, I'm going to honor you by sitting out the next two dances."

When she had seated herself by his side under a bower of roses he was very still for a moment. She looked at him with a quizzical expression and said:

"A penny for your thoughts. Am I so very wicked after all?"

"I don't think I have ever seen anything more dazzlingly beautiful than your banquet and ball, except the woman who conceived and executed it. I was just wondering whether your imagination was vivid enough to have dreamed half the splendors of such a fête when you turned from the little stage I built for you."

A look of pain clouded the fair face, and she lifted her jeweled hand.

"Please, Jim, I'd like to forget some things."

"And you haven't forgotten?"

She looked straight into his eyes and answered in even tones:

"No."

Both were silent for a long while, and then they began to talk in low tones of the life they had lived as boy and girl in the old south and forgot the fight of time.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Last Illusion.

THE longer Dr. Woodman watched the barbaric, sensual display of wealth sweeping before him, the deeper his spirits sank. The butler touched his arm, and he turned with a sudden start.

"Mr. Bivens will be pleased to see you in the little library, sir, if you will come at once."

When the doctor was ushered into the library Bivens, who was awaiting alone, sprang to his feet with a look of blank amazement, and then he began to play about his hand with his fingers.

My servant announced that a gentleman wished to speak to me a moment. Will you be good enough to tell me what you are doing in this house tonight?"

The doctor paused and hesitated, his face scarlet from the deliberate falsehood.

"I must really ask your pardon, Mr. Bivens, for my apparent intrusion. It only appeared, I came with my daughter. She sang tonight on your program."

"Oh, I see, with the other hired singers. Well, what do you want?"

"Only a few minutes of your time as a matter of grave importance."

"I don't care to discuss business here tonight, Woodman," Bivens broke in abruptly. "Come to my office."

"I have been there three or four times," the doctor went on hurriedly. "I wrote you twice. I felt sure that your letters had not reached you. I waited for the chance of a moment to tell you to lay my case before you."

"All right, I'll give you five minutes."

"I felt sure you had not seen my letters."

"I'll ease your mind on that question. I did see them both. You got answers?"

"That's just it. I didn't. And I don't understand it."

"Oh, I see!" Bivens' mouth quivered with the slightest sneer. "Perhaps it was lost in transit?"

"I'm sure was lost on the doctor, and was too intent on his purpose."

"Now, it was a mistake. I see it, and I'm perfectly willing to pay that mistake by accepting even of your last proposition."

Bivens laughed cynically.

"This might be serious, Woodman. If it isn't funny. But you had as well come and for all that I owe you nothing. Your suit has been lost. Your appeal has been forfeited. My offer is brief, but to the point—not a cent. My generosity is for my enemies—not my enemies."

"But we are not enemies personally," the doctor explained good naturedly. "I have put all bitterness out of my mind and come tonight to ask that bygone. You know that in

God's great book of accounts you are my debtor."

"I owe you nothing."

In every accent of the financier's voice the man before him felt the deadly merciless hatred whose fires had been smoldering for years.

The doctor's voice was full of tenderness when he replied at last:

"My boy," he began quietly—"for you are still a boy when you stand beside my gray hairs—men may fight one another for a great principle without being personal enemies. We are men still, with common hopes, fears, his, griefs and joys. When I was a soldier I fought the southern army, shot and shot to kill. I was fighting for a principle. When the firing ceased I helped the wounded men on the field as I came to them."

His voice quivered and broke for an instant.

"You have won. You can afford to be generous. That you can deny me in this the hour of my desolation is unthinkable. I'm not pleading for myself. I can live on a rat's allowance. I need \$2,000 immediately to complete her musical studies. Deep down in your heart of hearts you know that the act would be one of justice between man and man."

"As a charity, Woodman, I might give you the paltry \$50,000 you ask."

"I'll take it as a charity," he cried eagerly, "take it with joy and gratitude and thank God for his salvation sent in the hour of my need."

"But in reality you demand justice of me!" Come to the point, Woodman, what is in your mind when you say that I am your debtor?"

"Simply that I have always known that your formula for that drink was a prescription which I compounded years ago and which you often filed for me when I was busy. As a physician I could not patent such a thing. You had as much right to patent it as any one else."

"In other words," Bivens interrupted coldly, "you inform me that you have always known that I stole from your prescription counter the formula which gave me my first fortune."

The financier began to speak with a venomous energy:

"I've let you rattle on in your maudlin talk, Woodman, because it amused me. For years I've waited your coming. Your unexpected advent is the sweetest triumph of this festive night."

He paused and a sinister smile played about his mouth. "The last time I saw you I promised myself that I'd make you come to me the next time and when you did that you'd come on your hands and knees. And I swore that when you looked up into my face groveling and whining for mercy as you have tonight, I'd call my servants and order them to kick you down my doorstep."

He leaned across the massive flat top desk to touch an electric button.

The doctor's flat suddenly gripped the outstretched hand and his eyes glared into the face of the financier with the dangerous look of a madman.

"You had better not ring that bell, yet," he said, with forced quiet in his tones.

"Your tirade gives me an idea," said Bivens. "I want you to stay until the festivities end, and enjoy yourself. Take a look over my house. It cost two millions to build it, and requires half a million a year to keep it up. The butterflies those dancers are crushing beneath their feet in my ballroom I imported from Central America at a cost of \$5,000. The favors in jewelry I shall give to my rich guests who have no use for them will be worth \$25,000. Remember that I spent three hundred and fifty thousand on this banquet, which lasted eight hours, and that I will see you and your daughter dead and in the bottomless pit before I will give you one penny. Enjoy yourself, it's a fine evening."

Before the doctor could answer, the financier laughed and left the room.

For a long time the dazed man stood motionless. He passed his big hand over his forehead in a vague instinctive physical effort to lift the fog of horror and despair that was slowly strangling him.

He felt that he was suffocating. He tore his collar apart to give himself room to breathe. He thrust his hand into the hip pocket of his dress suit where he usually carried a handkerchief and felt something hard and cold.

It was a revolver he had been accustomed to carry of late in his rounds through the dangerous quarters of the city. Without thinking when he

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"You—did—what?" (To be Continued)