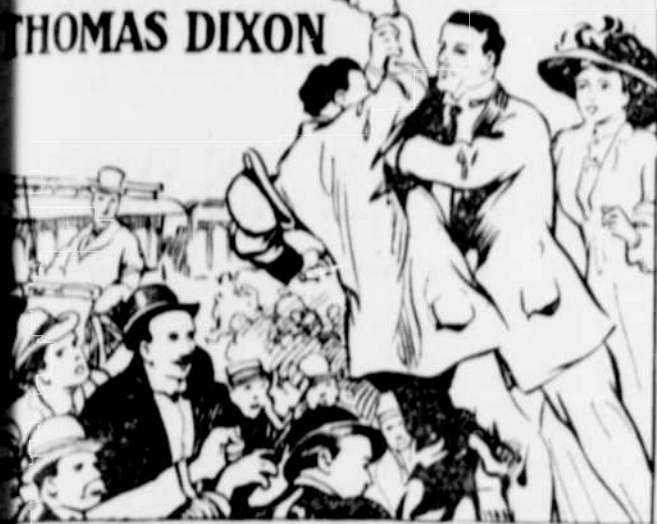


# THE ROOT OF EVIL

BY

THOMAS DIXON



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men to Bivens, he smiled for the first time. It was too good a thing. How could he play? He knew the game, the big game of the hunt! He told his doctors he would go to Europe and see if there were doctors over there who knew the thing.

He shaking, miserable little figure crept up the gangplank of a steamer. He made a brave show of strength to the reporters who pressed about him for an interview and collapsed in the arms of his wife reaching his stateroom.

He had forgotten his resentment on the part of Woodman in the presence of the Great Terror, whose shadow suddenly darkened the world.

The young lawyer had said goodby to Nan with a sense of profound relief. From the bottom of his soul he thanked God she was going away.

### CHAPTER XIX.

#### The Devil Smiles.

STUART returned with renewed energy and enthusiasm to the practice of law. The wide fame he had achieved as district attorney brought him the best clients and then he was able to choose only cases which involved principles of fighting for. His spare time he spent in a loving effort to restore the color to his old cheerful frame of face. He had returned Bivens' money and his protest and made his old loan sufficient for his needs, and his personal note for security.

He had no difficulty in learning the progress of Bivens in his search of hope for health. The daily cables from New York always gave him news as better. But Stuart knew the truth. He received two or three letters a week from Nan. She had told in full detail the little man's suffering, and at last of his homesickness, a fast developing into a mania.

Stuart was not surprised at the end of a month to hear her familiar voice on his telephone.

"Yes, we've returned, Jim—sailed in to escape the reporters. He is feeble. We haven't been in the city three hours, but he has asked for a dozen times. Can you come up now?"

Stuart hesitated, then, "I'll come," he replied slowly.

He lost all sense of danger in the warmth and tenderness of Nan's greeting. He not only forgot his fears but reached himself for his low estimation of her character in supposing that she would allow herself or permit him to cross the line of danger. Her solicitude for Bivens seemed deep and genuine.

Bivens' joy at meeting Stuart was pathetic, and moved him deeply. He was surprised to find him so strong, brightly, in body and yet so broken in spirit.

The little shrunken hand clung to Stuart's.

"You know, I felt the thing creeping up for the past two years, but I didn't let up. That's why I tried so hard to put some of the load on your shoulders. At least you can help me a little. To the devil with the doctors! I'm tired, too, of all the sycophants, flatters and fools who hang about me. I didn't mind 'em when I was young. But they get on my nerves now, doctors kept dining into my ears. I've got to rest and play, and I've got one old duffer over in France. An idea into my head that brought me back home to see you. He told me to get on a small boat with a single mate and a congenial friend, get away from land, cut every telephone and telegraph line, get no mail, and shoot ducks all winter, and he'd guarantee me a new man next spring. I've got you to accept the invitation. Give me to shoot ducks with you in Virginia." Stuart asked in surprise.

"Why, the one you used to reproach me for not accepting. Will you go now?"

Stuart shook his head.

"Can't go," he said slowly.

Bivens hadn't said Nan must go on the trip, but in a flash of warning lightning he knew it. The danger of a situation on a yacht would be such and only a fool would rush into it. "What's the matter?" the financier asked in tones of genuine distress.

"Very important legal business. I've no use in my going. I can tell you exactly where to go, the guides to find the kind of boats you'll need. I'll get along better without me. I won't go without you," the financier said peevishly. "You know the

place, you know all about the birds, you can teach me the ins and outs of the business and I can trust you. I know that you won't try to worm out of me any information my enemies would like to know. I appeal to the boy I used to know at college, the fellow who fought for me one day."

Stuart hesitated and looked at Nan, who had stood motionless while Bivens spoke.

"Well, if that's the way you put it, I'll take a vacation and go with you for a month."

Bivens seized his hand and pressed it gratefully.

"Best medicine I've had in weeks."

Nan walked slowly across the room, looked into his eyes and said, with emotion:

"Thank you, Jim."

In five days the party had completed all preparations and Bivens' big steamer, the Buccaneer, slipped quietly through the Narrows and headed for the Virginia coast, towing a trim little schooner built for cruising in the shoal waters of the south.

They had scarcely put to sea when Stuart began to curse himself for being led into such a situation.

Bivens had insisted with amateurish enthusiasm that they begin the cruise on the little schooner—with her limited crew and close quarters—at once, and use the Buccaneer as her tender. The moment they struck the swell outside Sandy Hook the financier wanted to bed and the doctor never left his side until the trip ended.

Nan was in magnificent spirits, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkled with the joy of a child. Stuart watched her with growing wonder at her eternal youth.

The night was one of extraordinary springlike air though it was the 15th of December. A gentle breeze was blowing from the south and the full moon flooded the smooth sea with soft silvery radiance. Nan insisted that Stuart sit on deck with her. There was no help for it. Bivens would allow no one except the doctor in his room, and so Stuart resigned himself to the beauty of the glorious scene.

"Jim!" she said, softly. "I don't like your attitude, and I think we'd

but Stuart folded his arms and looked at Bivens.

"Oh, come now, this is too ridiculous, a quarrel the first day of our shooting. But you'll have to get one thing fixed in your head once for all; you don't run the entire world. The telephone, telegraph and mail service have been suspended. The Buccaneer has put to sea for New York. You're on a little eighty-foot schooner, anchored in a bay ten miles wide and a hundred miles long and I'm in command. I won't stand any nonsense from you. Come down off your perch, quick!"

Bivens started to swear, caught the expression of Stuart's face and suddenly extended his hand.

"I'm sorry, Jim; you must not mind my foolishness. It was awfully nice of you to come. I'll stay in today, but you go and get some ducks for dinner, like a good boy, and say—take Nan along and teach her to shoot. It's getting to be the rage among the high fyers for the women to shoot."

"Please do, Jim!" Nan cried from the door. She had listened outside to the duel in the stateroom.

"All right," he answered.

For five days Bivens stuck to his bed with dogged determination, and each day Stuart went out with Nan. Never had she been more restlessly charming. Each day their association grew in tender intimacy and every fear that had stirred his heart at first was lulled at last to sleep.

On the sixth day Bivens rose early and declared that he would try the ducks. The barometer was falling, and dark, snowy looking clouds were piling up on the western horizon. A breeze came stealing out of the cloud banks with the chill of snow in its breath.

Bivens insisted on going out at once, against the advice and the protest of the guide. He not only insisted on going after the ducks, but, what was worse, swore that he was going to get his mail and telegrams from the shore.

Stuart protested vigorously.

"I've told you that the guide is the only man who can run that tender over the crooked course to the mainland, and if he goes away we'll have no one to take us out."

"What do you need a guide for? It's not a half mile to those blinds. I've seen you every day go back and forth in plain view of the yacht. Nan could row out there and back by herself. Send him ashore. Don't you know how to put out your own decoys?"

"If a strong blow comes we'll need two strong men to handle the boat."

"Rot!" Bivens cried. "We've got two tenders. Send your guide ashore with one of the sailors to run his engine. The other man can tow us out and back."

"I promise faithfully."

"Then you can help me down that steep companionway and I'll go to bed. Good night."

But he didn't spend a good night. The longer he thought of it the more sinister and dangerous he felt his position. At last he squarely faced the fact that his desire for Nan had increased a hundredfold by the fact that he had lost her.

As he sat in the darkness in his stateroom he could hear every sound in the adjoining one which she occupied as plainly as if the thin paneling of wood were not between them.

He was a fool to be caught in such a trap. His love had been too big and serious a tragedy to end in a vulgar intrigue. He made up his mind to cut his trip short on some pretext, and in the meantime he would devote himself faithfully to an attempt to start Bivens on the road to recovery.

At 8 o'clock the next morning the black nose of the Buccaneer slowly felt her way into Hog Island Inlet, on the shores of old Virginia, and dropped her anchor in the deep waters of the channel back of the sand spit.

As Stuart stepped on deck a cloud of black ducks circled gracefully overhead and slowly spread out on their feeding grounds. His heart gave a throb of primitive joy. He was a boy again and the world was young.

"Confound them!" he cried. "I'll show these ducks a trick or two before this trip is over."

He was glad he came. Bivens had put him in command of the little schooner, and he gave orders at once to lower a tender and tow her to an old anchorage he knew in a little cove behind Gull marsh. And then his trouble began with Bivens.

"Let 'em fly if they want to; I'm not going to budge. Go yourself, Jim."

"Go myself! What do you suppose I gave up my work and came down here a month for? I came to try to teach you how to live, you fool, and I'm not going without you. Get into your togs! The guides are here and ready. The tide waits for no man, not even a millionaire; it's ebbing now."

"Well, let it ebb. I don't want to stop it!" the sick man snarled.

Nan came in, pressed Stuart's hand as she passed, nodded good morning and joined her voice to Stuart's.

"Come; you must go, Cal. It's a glorious day."

The doctor slipped in a word too.

"By all means, Mr. Bivens, get your hand in the first day."

Bivens lifted himself to a half sitting posture, glared at his physician and yowled with fury:

"Get out—all of you—and let me alone!"

The doctor and Nan left on tip toe,



"Best medicine I've had in weeks."

better fight it out here and now in the beginning of this trip. It's useless to deny it. You hesitated to come on deck with me in the moonlight this evening. Your assumption of such chilling virtue is insulting. I wish an apology and a promise never to do so again."

"Have I really made you feel this?" he asked contritely.

"You have and feel it keenly. Let's come to an understanding. You and I both live in glass houses set on a very high hill. No matter what may be the secrets of my heart, I'm not a fool, and you can trust my good sense."

Stuart pressed her hand and said gently:

"I'm awfully sorry if I've made such an ass of myself that you have received this impression."

"Then I forgive you!" she cried, with a laugh, releasing her hand and rising, "but on one condition."

"Name it."

"That from this hour you be your old self without restraint and let me be mine."

### CHAPTER XX.

#### The Tempter's Voice.

AGAINST his judgment Stuart allowed Bivens to have his way. The little man clambered on deck and bustled about, giving orders to the sailor who was stowing the lunch and ammunition.

When Stuart stopped the tender at the first blind, about 500 yards away, Bivens protested.

"Here, here! I'm no mollycoddle if I have been sick. I can throw a stone to this blind. This isn't the one I want. There it is down yonder toward the end of that marsh. I saw thousands of ducks circling around it yesterday. I've given in to you every day we've been down here. I'm going to have my way this time."

He turned to the sailor who was running the tender's engine and spoke sharply.

"Go to that other blind!"

The sailor sprang to the wheel, and the tender shot ahead. Stuart settled back in his seat with angry disgust, and Bivens laughed.

"Cheer up; it's no use to give orders for a funeral yet. If we can't get back to that yacht in fifteen minutes against any wind that blows today I'll eat my hat. I'm feeling better than I have for months. I'm in for a good time. Don't be a piker."

Stuart determined to make the best of it.

"All right," he answered cheerfully.

"Good Lord, man, I could walk back to the yacht at low water—it all goes bare."

"Yes, unless the wind hauls in to the northeast and rolls in a big tide through that inlet."

"All right; let her roll. The tender will come back and pull us in."

By the time the decoys were out it began to spit snow, and the wind had freshened.

As the sailor was about to start back Stuart spoke sharply:

"Listen to me now, Niels. Keep a sharp watch on this weather. If you see the wind haul to the north put a compass in your tender, take your bearing from the yacht to this blind in case it should shut in thick and come after us in double quick time. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"If it looks bad don't wait too long. If it should be blowing a gale you'd better bring the cook along to steer while you watch your engine. Have him fix a light supper before he starts."

Bivens was vastly amused at Stuart's orders.

Stuart scanned the horizon, watching a flock of ducks working their way northward. The sign was ominous. Birds know which way the wind is going to blow before it comes, and if a gale is on the way they always work into the teeth of it.

It was useless to tell this to Bivens. He didn't have sense enough to understand it. But Stuart quietly made up his mind to take up the decoys and row in as soon as the tide ebbed down to two feet of water.

In the meantime he would make the best of the situation. The ducks began to come in and decoy like chickens. He killed half a dozen and in the excitement began to forget the foolhardiness of the trip.

Bivens shot a dozen times, missed, got disgusted and began to fret and complain. He said:

"Jim, would you mind telling me the mental process by which you rejected my offer? You're the only man I've struck on this earth that didn't have his price."

"Perhaps we have different ways of fixing values. You are not yet fifty years old and a wreck. What's the use? What can you do with your money now?"

"It brings luxury, ease, indulgence, power, admiration, wonder and the envy of the world."

"What's the good of luxury if you can't enjoy it, ease if you never take it, indulgence when you have lost the capacity to play, power if you're too busy getting more to stop and wield it?"

"Jim, you're the biggest fool I ever knew, without a single exception."

Stuart glanced anxiously toward the yacht. It was 3 o'clock. The tide had ebbed half out and there was barely enough water on the flats now for the tender to cross. It was snowing harder and the wind had begun to inch in toward the north.

"No more ducks today, Cal," Stuart said briskly, returning to his tone of friendly comradeship. "We've got to get away from here. It's getting colder every minute. It will be freezing before night."

"Well, let it freeze," Bivens cried peevishly. "What do we care? It's just ten minutes' run when the tender comes."

To Stuart's joy he saw the men start the tender.

"It's all right; they're coming now!" he exclaimed. "We'll have another crack or two before they get here."

He crouched low in the blind for five minutes without getting a shot, rose and looked for the tender. To his horror he saw her drifting helpless before the wind, her engine stopped and both men waving frantically their signals of distress.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "The tender's engine is broken down!"

"Why don't the fools use the oars?" "They can't move her against this wind!"

"Will they go to sea?" Bivens asked, with some anxiety.

"No; they'll bring up somewhere on a mud flat or marsh in the bay on this low water, but God help them if they can't fight their way back before flood-tide."

"Why?" Bivens asked incredulously.

"They'd freeze to death in an open boat tonight."

"Norwegian sailors? Bosh! Not on your life! They were born on icebergs."

Stuart rose and looked anxiously at the receding tide. He determined to try to reach the yacht at once. He put the guns into their cases, snapped the lids of the ammunition boxes, stowed the ducks he had killed under the stern

(To be Continued)

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