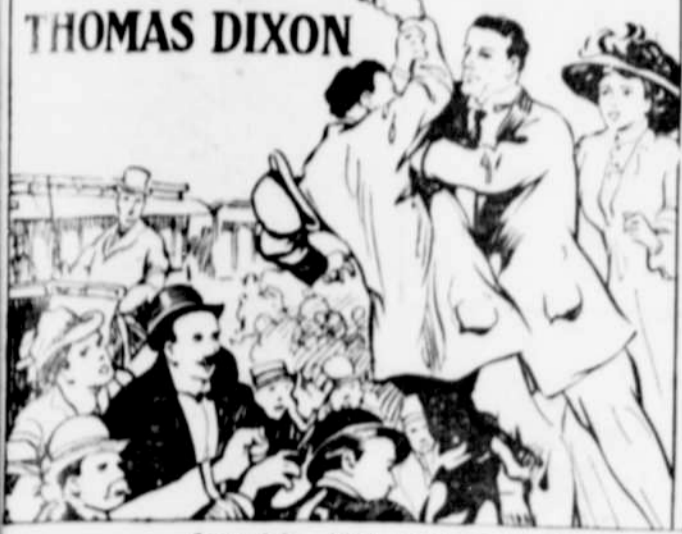


THE ROOT OF EVIL

BY THOMAS DIXON



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CHAPTER XXIII.

Decision.

BOTH Nan and the youngsters slept like children until 9 o'clock. Stuart helped the guides prepare breakfast without waking the sleepers and called them at 9.

At 10 o'clock breakfast was over, the guides had formed two exploring parties and set out with the young people chatting and laughing. "We'll keep house Jim, here in God's palace among the clouds until they return," said Nan.

"Yes," he answered cheerily, "and it will be fun to keep it alone, won't you with no restraints or studied presence, no crowd of fools or liveried hunkies near at hand."

They sat down on the ledge of rock which formed their cave house and gazed over the marvelous panorama of a world transformed into blue snowy mountains, flying clouds and aqueous skies. Over it all brooded the deep, solemn silence of eternity. But a sound reached the ear from earth or air. Nan broke the silence.

"I have houses in town and country, with every whim of body and mind apparently gratified. But suppose that all this madness of luxury, which you wonder, is but the vain effort of a hungry heart? The time we come in our lives when we should begin to see things as they are."

"I've been trying to do that for a long time," he answered quietly.

"And haven't succeeded," she added promptly. "The trouble is, Jim, that life is a tissue of lies. We are born in lies, grow up in lies, live and move and have our being in lies. I'm growing sick of lies."

Stuart looked at her flushed face with a deepening thrill of the drama of the soul its quick changing expression shadowed.

"Well?"

"I've grown to feel of late," she went on rapidly, "that it's a shame to dodge. The only law my husband has ever known is to take what he wants. I've the right to live my own life. We must each of us choose our world, the one of conventions and fashions or the big one that's beyond—the world of reality, where free men and women live and work in freedom and youth and daring lead the way."

She paused and Stuart's lips parted in amazement. Never had he heard such eloquence from the woman before.

"Jim," she went on falteringly, "I'm only sad heartsick. I'm trying to tell you that I want your love; that I can't live any longer without it."

Her head sank low, and a sob caught in her voice.

"There, I've told you. I've no pride left. Tell me that you love me. I don't want to hear it a thousand times. I don't want it right or wrong! Speak! Say something, if only to curse me!"

"You should have thought of this, before these gray hairs began to creep into my hair."

"I did, Jim," she cried, eagerly bending toward him. "God knows I fought! You never knew it, but I did. For whole nights I wrestled with the fiend that tempted me and fought for my love. Week days and weeks to strangle its life on my heart and force me to be true to myself. Oh, Jim, it's not too late to live! Look at me, dearest, tell me it's not. For God's sake, tell me that you love me still! Am I old? Am I faded?"

The man had felt sure of himself when she began, but the tenderness, the passion, the yearning appeal of her eyes were more than he could resist. He looked into her eyes, Nan, he cried, and let me see the bottom of your soul."

She lifted her dark lustrous eyes, gazing him with love.

"You'll find only your image there."

He looked at her sternly.

"Before I take you into my arms and kiss you with kisses," he whispered fiercely, "there mustn't be any shadow of this time. I've got to know your love for me is the biggest thing in your life—the only thing in your life!"

"I swear it!" she gasped.

"You've got to prove it; I'm going to test you to the test."

"Any test!" she broke in quickly.

"Warn you," he went on, with increasing seriousness, "the test will be a hard one. You and I, Nan, could be happy with the shadow of your fortune over us."

"But its shadow can't be over us! It's going to be yours. He has given me—his death is only a question

of a year or two—and I'm going to give it all to you."

"There's not a dollar of his millions that isn't untraced. I'd sooner wear the rags of a leper than soil my hands with it. If you love me you will have to give up these millions."

Nan gazed at him in astonishment and broke into a low laugh.

"Of course, you're teasing me. You can't be in earnest in such an absurd dime novel idea! Give away this enormous fortune!"

The woman placed her hand tenderly in his and nestled close to his side.

"Come, Jim, dear, this is a practical world; you have some common sense even if you are a man of genius; you're not insane!"

"I think not," he answered, soberly.

"You cannot make this absurd demand on me," she repeated slowly, "knowing the awful price I paid for these millions?"

"It's because I know it that I make the demand," he went on, passionately. "We are face to face now, you and I, with all the little subtleties and lies of life torn from our eyes. The fact that the price at which he bought you was high—say a hundred millions—does not change the fact. I refuse to share with the woman I love the price for which she sold herself, whether the sum be a hundred dollars or a hundred millions! I can forgive and have forgiven the wrong you've done me, but I could never share its conscious degradation."

Nan looked at him in despair, her eyes suddenly clouding with tears.

"What do you mean when you say give up these millions?"

"Just what I say," he answered quickly.

"But I couldn't throw them into the street. What would I do with them?"

"You can give them back to the people, the public, from whom they were taken—the people whose labor created their value. That's what an honest man does when he finds he has wronged his neighbor. There's not a stone in your palaces whose cement was not mixed in human tears. The stain of blood is in every scarlet thread of your carpets, rugs and curtains."

"But you are talking like a mad anarchist. His money was made as all great fortunes are made."

"So much the worse for our financiers. Civilization must rest at least on justice or it can't endure."

"But, Jim, no matter what your theories of life or your ambitions, these millions will make them more powerful."

"It's not true. Not a single great man whose words have molded the world was rich. The glitter of your millions once blinded me and I was on the point of surrender, but I've won out. The people in your little world live for money. They do not possess it, they are possessed by it. They are slaves. You will have to come with me into the great free world—if you love me."

"If I love you?" Nan cried, with trembling lips. "Don't speak that way. If you only knew! My love for you has kept me alive through all that I've endured. It's the only thing that's worth the struggle; but I can't think. Your demand is so sudden, so stunning, so terrifying, I don't know what to say."

"We can never be anything to each other," he answered firmly, "on any other terms than the renunciation of all that Bivens leaves. I don't care what you do with it, just so you wash your hands of it. You and I must begin life just where we left off when the shadow of his money darkened the world for us both. You must give it up."

"It's hard, dearest," she said with a sob, "for your sake it's hard. I've dreamed so many wonderful things that would come to pass when I made you the master of these millions."

"You must choose between his money and my love; you can't have both."

She gazed at him with a desperate yearning.

"I'll do anything you wish, only love me, dearest," she sobbed. "All I ask is to be loved—loved—loved—and that you never leave me."

But even as she spoke, her mind was made up. She would reserve at least half her fortune secretly. When they were married she could persuade him to be reasonable.

"All right, then, it's settled, but it must be everything with me or nothing. I won't shake hands with my friend and make love to his wife. You must cease to be his wife now."

"But how—what do you mean?" she asked, white with sudden fear.

"Leave your husband, your palaces,

your millions and join me tomorrow night on the limited for New York. Bring only a change of clothes in a single trunk and a hand bag. My money must be sufficient. I'll wire for passage on an outgoing steamer. We'll spend two years in Europe and return to America when we please. Are you ready?"

"Oh, Jim, dear," she faltered, "you know that would be madness!"

"Certainly it's madness, the madness of a great love! Come, why do you hesitate?"

The lines of her body relaxed and she began to sob softly. The man waited in silence for her to speak.

"I've done you harm enough, dearest," she said at last. "I can't do this."

"And your thought is only of me, Nan?" he asked with piercing intensity.

"And of myself," she acknowledged brokenly. "I couldn't do such an insane, vulgar thing."

"I didn't think you could," was the bitter response.

"All I ask," she pleaded, "is to hear you say the words that you love me now—just as I am with all my faults."

"Well, I shall not speak them," he answered savagely. "Your husband is the master of millions, but I am the master of something bigger—I am the master of myself. I will not play a second fiddle to your little husband."

The dark head dropped lower. When she lifted it at last two despairing tears were shining in her eyes.

"I understand, Jim," she said simply. "We will go on as we have. I'll wait in silence."

He rose and lifted her to her feet. The voices of the youngsters rang up the mountain's side.

"No, we can't go on like this now, Nan," he said with quiet strength. "The silence has been broken between us. Your husband is my friend and from today our lives must lie apart. It's the only way."

She extended her hand and he pressed it tenderly. Her voice was the merest sobbing whisper when she spoke: "Yes, Jim, I suppose it's the only way."

CHAPTER XXIV.

The White Messenger.

IN spite of Bivens' protest Stuart returned to New York on the first train the morning after the coaching party reached the house.

"Stay a week longer," the little man urged, "and I'll go with you. We'll go together, I of us, in my car. I'm getting worse here every day. I've got to get back to my doctors in New York."

"I'm sorry, Cal," he answered quickly, "but I must leave at once."

Nan allowed him to go without an effort to change his decision. A strange calm had come over her. She drove to the station with him in silence. He began to wonder what it meant.

As he stepped from the machine she extended her hand, with a tender smile, and said in low tones:

"Until we meet again."

He pressed it gently and was gone.

He reached New York thoroughly exhausted and blue, but the sight of Harriet seated on the stoop of the old home by the square watching a crowd of children play brought a smile back to his haggard face.

"They've come to honor me with their good wishes on my voyage," she said.

"What voyage?" he asked in surprise.

"Oh, you didn't know. I've an engagement to sing on the continent this summer. The news came the day you left. Isn't that fine? I sail next week."

A sudden idea struck him.

"Let me go with you, girlie?"

"Oh, Jim, if you only would, I'd be in heaven!"

"I will!" he said with decision.

"You've booked your passage?"

"Yes, but I'll change it to suit you."

He found business which required a week and booked his passage with Harriet on a Cunarder which sailed in ten days. A week later Nan and Bivens returned to their New York house. The papers were full of stories of his falling health.

Two days after her arrival Nan telephoned to Stuart.

"You must come up to see Cal tonight," she said earnestly. "He is asking for you."

"Is he really dangerously ill?" Stuart interrupted.

"It's far more serious than the papers suspect. You'll come?"

"Yes, early tomorrow morning. I've an important engagement tonight that will keep me until 12 o'clock. I'm sailing for Europe day after tomorrow."

A sudden click at the other end and he was cut off. His experienced ear told him it was not an accident.

It was just dawn when Stuart's telephone rang and he leaped from bed, started at the unusual call.

"Well, well," he cried in quick, impatient tones, "who is it? What is the matter?"

"For heaven's sake come at once, Cal was taken dangerously ill at 2 o'clock. The doctors have been with him every moment. He doesn't get any better. He keeps calling for you."

"I'll be there in half an hour—three-quarters at the most."

"Thank you," she gasped, and hung up her receiver.

Stuart's cab whirled uptown through the rivers of humanity pouring down to begin again the round of another day. In all the hurrying thousands not one knew or cared a straw whether the man of millions in his silent palace on the drive lived or died.

The house was evidently in hopeless confusion. Servants wandered in every direction without order. Doctor after doctor passed in and out, and the sickening odor of medicines filled the air. A group of newspaper reporters

stood at the foot of the grand stairway.

Nan stood shivering at the head of the stairs, pale, disheveled, her dark eyes wide and staring with a new expression of terror in their depths.

"How is he, Nan?"

"Worse," she stammered through chattering teeth. "The doctors say he can't possibly live. He has been calling for me for the last hour, I—can't—go!"

"Why?"

"I'm afraid!"

He took her hand. It was cold and he felt a tremor run through her body at his touch.

"Come, come, Nan, you're not a silly child. I'm ashamed of you. If Cal is calling, go to him at once. You must see him."

Shivering in silence she led Stuart to the door of Bivens' room and fled to her own.

On a magnificent bed of gleaming ebony inlaid with rows of opals, thousands of opals, Stuart found the little shriveled form. The swarthy face was white and drawn, the hard thin lips fallen back from two rows of smooth teeth in pitiful, fevered weakness. The shifting eyes caught sight of Stuart.

"It's awfully good of you to come up here so soon," he began feebly. "I've some plans I want you to carry out for me right away. You see I never thought before of the world as a place where there were so many men and women sick and suffering—thousands and tens and hundreds of thousands. These doctors say that every night in New York alone there are half a million people sick or bending over the beds of loved ones who are suffering, and two hundred die every day."

He paused for breath, and the black eyes stared at his friend.

"Jim, I can't die! I haven't lived! I've got to get up from here and do some things I've meant to do—all those



"I'll make good. Do you understand? Ten millions each!"

sick people—I've got to do something for them. I'm going to build palaces for the lame, the halt, the sick, the blind. I'm going to gather the great men of science from the ends of the earth and set them to work to lift this shadow from the world."

A sudden pain seized and convulsed his frail body and Stuart called the doctors from the next room.

They stood by in helpless sympathy.

"Can't you stop this pain?" the financier gasped in anger. "What are you here for? Am I not able to buy enough morphine to stop this hellish agony?"

His family doctor bent and said:

"Your heart action is too low just now, Mr. Bivens, you can't stand it."

"Well, I can't stand this! Give it to me, I tell you!"

The doctor took a hypodermic syringe, filled it with water and injected it into his arm.

While Stuart watched the pitiful trick, his eye wandered over the magnificent trappings of the room.

"What irony of fate!" he exclaimed, under his breath.

The sufferer stared and beckoned to Stuart.

Handing him a key which he drew from beneath his pillow he cried:

"Unlock the right hand top drawer of that safe, Jim—the door is open. Hand me those bundles of stocks and bonds and call those doctors."

Stuart complied with his request and Bivens spread the brilliantly colored papers on the white covering of his bed, while the doctors drew near.

"Listen now, gentlemen," he began, still gasping with pain. "You're our greatest living doctors, I'm told. Well, I'm not willing to die. I won't die—do you hear? I'm only forty-nine years old. You see here thirty millions in gilt edged stocks and bonds. Well, there are three of you. I'll give you ten millions each to take this stone off of my breast that's smothering me and give me five years more of life."

The three men of science stood with folded, helpless arms and made no effort to keep back the tears. They had seen many men die. It was nothing new—and yet the pity and pathos of this strange appeal found their way to the soul of each. They never envied a millionaire again.

They retired for another consultation. Stuart replaced the papers and gave the key to Bivens.

"Ask Nan to come here a minute," he said feebly.

Stuart walked to the door and whispered to a servant. When he returned

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