

# The Whited Sepulchre

The Tale of Pelee

BY WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

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CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

They had reached the highway. Constable was thinking that he would have journeyed across the world to study a laboring monster, like Pelee in his present stress, but the idea of the girl being in the shadow of danger took all the relish from the work.

"I should prefer to hear you discuss the treachery of volcanoes outside of the fire zone," she said, shivering. "It's like listening to ghost stories in a haunted house."

"I'll tell you the best way out of it," he declared. "I don't say that Pelee is about to rise and rend Saint Pierre, but I want to take you all out to sea for a few days. The Madame will behave her prettiest with you on board."

"I can't imagine anything finer, but you know mother is not a graceful sail-or."

"Unfortunately, any effort of mine to prevail upon her might spoil matters," Constable said.

"Oh, I don't think that," she replied; "but it will be something of a conquest for any one to shake her trust in Pelee. Still, I'll do what I can."

"And I'll begin work to-night upon Uncle Joey. By the way, Miss Stansbury," he added in a lowered voice, "don't you think that if I chose to stay here in Saint Pierre, your mother might consent more willingly to try a few days on the Madame? You know Pelee is more than ever interesting to me now."

"That would be entirely unthinkable," she replied hastily.

Pelee rumbled again, and the girl's fingers tightened upon his arm. The heavy wooden shutters of the plantation house rattled in the windless night; the ground upon which they stood seemed to wince at the monster's pain. The man was conscious of the fragrance of roses and magnolia blooms above the acrid taint of the air. It was as if, through some strange freak of the atmosphere, a pressure was exerted upon the flowers, forcing a sudden expulsion of perfume. The young moon was a yellow, formless blotch in the fouled sky. A sigh like the whimpering of a sick child was audible from the servants' cabins behind the big house.

"You'll plead with your mother to-night?" he whispered, as they walked back.

Mrs. Stansbury was on the porch. Her nicely modulated voice, as she spoke to her daughter, struck Constable with a cold force. The women went indoors. Breen and Uncle Joey were in conversation. Constable drew his chair to the north end of the porch, and faced the mountain—a vast black beast couchant under the dim stars. Since he had gazed in that direction from the ship the night before, the whole purpose of his life had changed. Then he had asked no sweeter favor of the Fates than to be permitted to observe the giant's struggle to contain the fury of his fluids. Now his thoughts were magnetized by a new substance—the substance of fear. Self, the tribune of all his reckonings heretofore, had been lifted from his brain, as a familiar volume is lifted from its case.

"I knew it," he muttered. "I knew it five years ago—that I should come back here some day, look upon that girl, and become a raver like other men. To think that I could stay away from her a year at a time!"

He regarded the double chain of lights out in the harbor—the Madame pulling at her moorings among the lesser craft, like a lustrous empress in the midst of dusky maid-servants. Between the black mountain and the illumined ship stretched a battle. It was his own particular battle. His name was called from the lists. To win was to run away. The old mastering complication was his at last. Yesterday a splendid contribution to the imperfect records of seismology, such as was now within his grasp, was identified with his highest ambition. To-day the safety of the woman towered above it, as the dome of St. Peter's above the head of a tourist. He was afraid of Pelee. Breen drew over to him and sat down upon the railing.

"What's on your mind, Peter?"

"A mountain," said Constable.

Rain did not fall in the night, and Constable was abroad with the dawn, regarding the white world and the source of the phenomenon, with the sketchy tints of earliest morning upon the huge eastern slope. He had slept little, and that with his face turned to the north. He would scarcely close his eyes before a cortege of volcanoes would pass before him, as in a dream—all the destroyers of history, each with a vivid individuality, like the types of faces of all nations—the story of each, and the smear it had made of men and the works of men.

Most of them had given warning. Pelee was warning now. His warning was written upon the veins of every leaf, painted upon the curve of every blade of grass, sheeted evenly white upon the tiles of every roof. Gray dust blown by steam from the bursting quarries of the mountain, clogging the gutters of the city, and the throats of men! It was a moving white cloud in the rivers, a chalky shading that marked the highest reach of the harbor tide. It settled in the hair of the children, and complicated the toll of the bees in the nectar-cups of the roses. With league-long cements, and in a voice that caused to tremble his dwarfed cohorts, the hills and mornes, great Pelee had proclaimed his warning in the night.

Constable was standing in the garden. "Good old Vulcan, to wait for her!" he murmured. "Sit tight for another day, and keep a stiff bridle-arm—for one more day!"

"It isn't really ash, you know," he found himself saying at breakfast, "but rock ground as fine as neat and shot out by steam through Pelee's valves."

"How intensely graphic!" Mrs. Stansbury observed.

"It's a graphic morning," said Breen, "and Peter is virile from a night of meditation. I believe he has made a covenant with the mountain."

Constable had met the eyes of the daughter, and found no hope there. He had taken his uncle apart and charged him to labor for the cause of flight.

"Urula," the planter began gravely, addressing Mrs. Stansbury, "Peter has asked us to spend a few days with him in the Caribbean, on board the Madame. I confess that I don't like the way Pelee is acting, and the heat is telling on us all. The prospect of a refreshing breath of the Trades is a mighty pleasant one to me. Doesn't it sound so to you?"

"As a specialist in volcanoes, I should think Mr. Constable would find it impossible to leave at such a time," the elder woman answered smoothly. "The mountain needs his doctor more than ever now."

"I have not yet attained unto such a scientific passion that I can forget my friends entirely," Constable said earnestly. "For my part," the girl hastened to say, "Mr. Constable's invitation is immensely alluring."

Mrs. Stansbury's eyelids contracted ever so little, and she lingered upon the words of her ultimatum, as if there were a tang of pleasure in the utterance. "The Panther arrives day after to-morrow morning, with the New York mail. I would not under any condition think of leaving Saint Pierre before receiving Mr. Stansbury's letters."

Constable stared at the face of the daughter. He read there terror of the mountain, and pity for himself. He arose, not daring to trust himself to speak again. Breen found him in his room a few minutes later.

"Peter," he said softly, "has it ever occurred to you that the map of Europe and the history of France might greatly have been altered if our beloved Josephine had been gifted with a will like that?"

CHAPTER IV.

In the Rue de Rivoli there was a little stone fruit shop. The street was short, narrow, crooked and ill paved—a cleft in Saint Pierre's terrace work. Just across from the vault-like entrance to the shop, the white, scarred cliff arose to another flight of the city. Between the shop and the living rooms behind there was a little court, shaded by mango-trees. Dwarfed banana shrubs flourished in the shade of the mangoes, and singing birds were caged in the lower foliage. Since the sun could find no entrance, the shop was dark as a cave, and as cool. One window, if an aperture like the clean wound of a thirteen-inch gun could be called a window, opened to the north; and from it, by the grace of a crook in the Rue de Rivoli, might be seen the mighty calibered cone of Pelee.

Pere Rabeaut's fruit was very good, and some of it was very cheap. The service was much as you made it, for if you were known you were permitted to help yourself. In this world there was no one of station too lofty to go to Pierre Rabeaut's; you would meet no one there to whom it was not a privilege to say "Bon jour."

"Come and see my birds," the crafty Rabeaut would say, if he approved of you.

"Where do you live?" you might ask, being a stranger.

"In the coolest hovel of Saint Pierre," was the invariable answer.

And presently, if you were truly alive, you would find yourself in the little stone shop, listening to the birds. In due course Soronia would appear in the shadow doorway and it would seem that the bird songs were hushed as she crossed the court.

If the little stone shop were transplanted in New York, artists would find it and have difficulty in getting in and out, for the crowd o' nights. Thither Constable and Breen made their way on this burning morning which Mrs. Stansbury darkened with her decision. The pair sat down in the cherished coolness, Constable at the little window, so that he could look at the mountain.

"Breen, I dare not leave them here for forty-eight hours, until the Panther comes," Constable said.

"Do you really think Pelee can't hold out that long?"

Constable shook his head impatiently. "I'm not a monomaniac—at least, not yet, Breen," he said, and his voice suggested the world of pent savagery in his brain. "The ways of volcanoes are past the provisions of men. I do not say that Pelee will blow his head off this week, or this millennium. I say I'm afraid for this girl. I say there are vaults of explosives in that monster, the smallest of which could make this city look like a leper's corpse upon the beach. I say that the internal fires are burning high; that they are already fingering the vital cap; that Pelee sprung a leak last night, and that the same force which lifted this cheerful archipelago from the depths of



the sea is pressing against the leak at this instant. I say that Vesuvius warned before he broke; that Krakatoa warned and then struck; that down the ages these safety valves scattered over the face of earth have trembled before giving way. Pelee is trembling now, and there is a woman here whose safety is—important to me. She is two miles away this moment, and I am as powerless as a man in a street fight, with his lady's arms about him. What shall I do?"

"Peter, there is a short cut," Breen said.

"Tell me!" Constable urged.

"Are you zealous and strong-souled?"

"Try me."

At this juncture Soronia entered the shop from the little court of the song birds, filling the eyes of the Americans. A dark, ardent, alluring face; flesh like dull gold, made wonderful by the faintest tints of ripe fruit; eyes that could melt and burn and laugh; a fragile figure, but radiantly alabam, and as worthily draped as a young palm in a vine richly blossoming. Such, vaguely, was Soronia. She made one think of a strange, regal flower, an experiment of Nature, wrought in the most sumptuous shadow of a tropic garden. She was gone. Breen's face bore a drained look.

"An orchid?" he whispered. "Will the visitation be repeated? Do I wake or sleep?"

"Old Pere Rabeaut married a French woman," Constable observed.

"Some Daphne of the islands, she must have been, since Pere Rabeaut does not seem designed to father a sunrise," Breen added, his eyes lost in the shadows of the court, from whence the bird songs came.

Pere Rabeaut was a worthy soldier of France, I have heard," said Constable. "I have never seen the mother, but every year I have seen Soronia—for a moment like this. She was but a child when I came first—five years ago—but a radiant child even then."

"Five years ago," Breen mused. "Five years ago I had not ceased to paint. I should have put her on canvas."

There was a moment of silence, then Constable said in a low voice, "I must go back. Tell me the shorter way."

"Peter, you are a man, and she a woman. Forgive me, but I know what has sprung into your heart in the past twenty-four hours from the seeds that have been there five years. Tell her—tell her all about those five years and the one day—what they have meant to you, and your dream of the future. If you tell her mightily enough, she will follow you to the Madame, and cast no longing look behind! I shall stay here for an hour or two."

Constable left the shop. He was very miserable, full of undirected wrath. Never in his life before had there been a time when a stiff shoulder, dollars, an athletic mind, or all three, had failed entirely to move an obstacle in his way. Here he was ground by impotence absolute. The suggestion of Breen entailed such a deep and vital thing that he dared not think of it, here in the glaring day, with the panting crowd about him. It was against the very structure of his mind to act precipitately in this, of all matters, most delicate. It is true that he meant now to win Lara Stansbury, if such a stately citadel lay within range of a man of his caliber; but he had vouchsafed to strike only after a flawless investment were laid.

Breen did not return for luncheon, and the name of Pelee was not heard. In his room, afterward, Constable fell asleep, with his face to the north. He awoke out of a horrid dream, in which black fingers were tightening, like a garrote, upon his throat. It was the ash and sulphur fumes again. Pelee was obscured by the fresh fog. Instantly, upon awakening, the old thoughts and dreams resumed their hateful swing in his brain. The sight of the Madame, lying out in the harbor, her needle-boom pointed like a black, fleshless finger across the smoky sunset, whipped him again to the sense of action which had no means of expression. Thoughts of the night—the locked doors, the still halls, the wail of children from the native cabins, sleeplessness without hope, vigilance without meaning, and this new master-romance shining far and bright and alone, like a brave star above wind-burled clouds—out of these were moulded thoughts of little mercy, as the shadows grew long upon the whitening lawn.

Pelee's moods were variable that afternoon. The twilight brought ease again, and with the old freshness of evening came a glad hour of reaction. There was a rippling wave of merriment from the dark quarters, and a score of children went blithely forth to bathe in the sea. Never before was the volatile tropic soul so imperiously evidenced—simple hearts which glow at little things, whose swift tragedies come and go like blighting winds, which slay but leave no wound.

Constable was ashamed for the moment. Throughout the day his eyes had fixed in stubborn gloom upon a cataclysm. Up the stairway, airily as laughter, came a bright melody from the piano. He was thrilled, and held, and his mind was stirred with tenderness. She was like her island people, quick to enter the groves of serenity when the black cloud had blown by. Could Breen be right? he thought. The suggestion appealed to him now in a new high-light. Were there not some words which had never yet found the ears of woman from the lips of man—some key to instant supremacy in the undiscovered country of a lovely woman's nature?

(To be continued.)

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GEORGIA BENNETT, Clerk, Guardian Neighbor.

**SUGAR LOAF CAMP** No. 208, W. of the W. Meets on the First and Third Tuesdays of each month.  
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E. SCHNEIDER, Clerk.

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L. A. ROBERTS, Secretary.

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**Ambiguous.**

"I would like to see more moving verse from your pen," said the admirer.

"Do you mean something pathetic," asked the poet, "or something about springtime moves?" — Kansas City Times

**What It Was.**

"Oh, John!" she exclaimed, "now that you've seen my new bonnet, you simply can't regret that I got it. Isn't it just a poem?"

"Well, if it is," replied John, "I guess a proper title for it would be 'Owed to a milliner.'" — Philadelphia Press.