

The Vanishing Men

BY RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD

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WELL SERVICE

(Continued From Last Week)

"At the hotel," she suggested. The man with the lantern raised it again to look at her; he was silent, and then suddenly he grinned.

"Oh, at hotel, eh? I know them. Certain. At the hotel. He came by big automobile."

"Peter DeWolf?"

The other shook his head; he did not know. He said in a soothing, codding voice, "S'all ri', missy. You come, eh?" He beckoned with a finger.

Brena nodded and followed him as he walked on before, the lantern swinging at his knees, the shadow of his dark short bowed legs swinging on the gravel and the noncommittal dark beyond in every direction squirming and alive with black maggot's of fear.

Suddenly the lantern illumined an entrance cut in a high adobe wall. The man, turning around, said in his petting voice, "Come." Brena stepped through into an enclosure without roof; the stars of the sky shone down with their little white needles of light. The lantern, however, now threw its light upon a little two-story wooden building within the old walls. This structure was dark below except for the lantern's light from the glass; its faint two squares of windows above were black on either side of a doorway reached by narrow rickety wooden stairs built on the exterior of the house.

"Up," commanded the Mexican with his hand on the rail.

Brena hesitated.

"I take you to them."

She began to climb, gripping the hand-painted rail to steady her nerves by the force of her own arm muscles.

"In! This my house. I keep for Mister Glauk. In!"

She passed by him as he flattened himself against the door jamb.

Four closed doors, unpainted and covered with penciled signatures, dates, arithmetic, and scrawled faces and verses, almost filled the walls of the narrow seven feet of square wall. With a grunt, like a pig's, the Mexican opened one of these doors and plucked at Brena's elbow.

"Look! What I say? This Heem?"

The lantern's circle of light rose and widened as he held it higher until it

"Look! What I say? This Heem?"

covered a cot on which a waking sleeper was pushing himself up on one arm and reaching under a pillow with the other hand.

"A lady," the Mexican said, and putting the lantern on the bare boards, he slid out and closed the door.

The man on the cot sprang up, raised the lantern, and at the end of a high exclamation he gasped for another breath and ejaculated, "Brena!"

"Yes, I thought I must stop you."

"But if you never came back to me—"

"If anything—" She stopped. "Why?"

"No, I thought I must stop you."

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dear."

"Bad business," he said. "Look here, Brena. For the first time in my life I've been figuring what a real partner-

ship really means. And it can't exist without perfect unbroken truth—play-

ing the game, not separately, but to-

gether—all the time—an unbroken record."

She said, "I know. There isn't much to say. My fear. My conscience. And it was you who were going to take the risk. Not anybody else, Peter—and I loved you. I took the paper from a package from the chemist's shop. I wrote."

"It won't do," he said harshly. "It is a bad spot on the fruit."

For a long time she sat on the edge of his cot without a word. At last, "Peter."

"Yes."

"Tell me, Peter. There must have been times when you wondered about me—doubted me—questioned me. Did you keep faith?"

He waited, but his answer was clear. It was not only an answer to her question; in his voice there was more—an understanding of the truth that right and wrong are not readily divided with a high impassable wall between them. There is a teetering, and that which counts is the spirit of the game, that leads one to put weight most often on the right end. All this he said to her in the one word: "No."

After a moment her hand came through the dark into his.

"I think we are all right, Peter," she said. "If we can ever have each other, dear—forever—I think we could—"

"Do what?"

"Work out something pretty fine."

"We will," he said. "I'm almost at the point where I score, Brena. I've brought a high-powered car here. Two hundred-odd miles into this hell of desert. And tomorrow, I go tomorrow."

He struck a match and relit the lantern.

"Tell me, Peter," she said, brushing the red-gold hair back from her forehead.

"I did tell you. I said I had a theory—a theory about where they went—Hemphill first—and Parmelee. If I am not right, heaven help us! I've not been afraid yet—not in my real self. If I'm right I'll laugh at myself for toting a gun around and for a lot of fool ideas I've had. But if I'm wrong

now, I'd be afraid. I'm no coward, but I'd squirm with fear."

Her eyes were full of a troubled expression.

"But you don't tell me, Peter."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because if I was wrong it would always appear to you that I had been the inventor of injustice. Let me test your faith in me, Brena. Give me three days more."

"Yes, but when you ride off into the desert—to danger, you said, provided you were wrong—I'm going too."

"You can't."

"Yes, I am going with you, Peter."

"It might be too hideous."

"I am going."

The strange authority with which she sometimes spoke was now in her voice and in her eyes; it was as if she were speaking, not out of herself alone, but were one who voiced a decree of those who had willed an inexorable end.

"Let me show you then where we are going," he said with his lips pressed together. "Let me show you a map. Let me tell you how we shall have to steer our way over a trailless waste by compass as if we were at sea! It's a country of terrible distances and heat and thirst. If the car breaks down they'd never hear of us."

"We'd be out there for years," she said in the voice of one who in a great happiness feels sleep pulling down the eyelids, drawing its mists across the mind. "We'd have our hands—like this—"

I suppose, I'd rather—do that, Peter—than not have—each other."

He picked her up in his arms. He felt her lips wetly peeling at his shoulders. He heard her whispering: "I'm not ill, Peter. I'm just tired. And I don't have to pretend with you, do I?" He felt her warm breath.

He put her down at full length on the cot and sitting on the floor beside her moved his fingertips across her white forehead. Her profile of features, of body, of drapery, made him think of the queens and saints carved in marble on the tops of sarcophagi in ancient abbeys; lying in this world little room, her face turned toward the smoky ceiling, nevertheless she had their calm, their suggestion of belonging to great emotions, a sense of great deeds and to some grand con-

tinuity. Brena had been carved by a great sculptor, and the limp hand that still rested in sleep upon his bare neck was warm with the promise of living expectancies.

CHAPTER XVII

Brena, who had slept long and restfully in spite of the stinging dry heat, had awakened before the sun had gone down to find Peter was attending to the last details of equipping the high-powered car that he had bought in El Paso. It was below the window in the old courtyard with the crumbling adobe wall.

"Hello," he had said, looking up.

"You just missed seeing the popula-

tion of this town. The entire ten were here. They don't know we're going to strike into the desert instead of going eastward."

He had held up his fingers to count on them. "We're all provisioned now—from the general store—gasoline cans, water in demijohns, matches, canned beans and other things, a bottle of olives, guaranteed very old, and one paper napkin. I say—why do you ever do your hair up at all? It's rather wonderful, falling all around like that."

"I didn't take it down."

"No, I did. I ran it through my fingers like a miser with his gold—and his untarnished copper threads. If a miser has them too. Why not braid it? We're going where there are no fashions, Brena."

"Today?"

"Tonight. There'll be a white moon as big as a plate for hours. We'll make a hundred miles at least through the depression that runs along the foot of some prehistoric torrent to the north-west. Thanks to old Father Carlos, the hard-headed Jesuit, it's on the map. Easy to follow."

When the purple crepe of evening had been spread over the baking sands and the stars had been set out in their infinite careless pattern in the high desert sky, the car, with opened muffler, turned her nose out of the trail that followed the line of the railroad and began to kick the sand behind as if she were a bound. It was as if she were leaving forever the sight and memory of mankind.

To be continued next week.

Beaverton Review, \$1.50 per yr

LOCAL NEWS

Mr. Leland Cook is home for a couple of weeks.

The many friends of Mrs. Lela Brown who formerly owned the Service Lumber Co., will be interested in learning that she has opened a real estate office in Pampa, Texas.

Mr. Roy Emmons, who has been for some time very ill in a Portland hospital, has so far recovered that he was brought

to the home of his father, Mr. W. B. Emmons last Sunday.

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