

# THE DARK KNIGHT

by William Smith

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into dull anger.

"I'm sorry I was so clumsy, Miss Durant," he said gravely, "and I hope you will forgive me."

Reggie turned on him. "Big boy," he sneered coldly, "I hear that you are from Montana. I should advise you to go back out there with the



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rest of the herd."

Rod stiffened and seemed about to strike Reggie. Lyla broke in angrily: "Why Reggie!" she exclaimed, "how dare you insult my guest like that? How dare you!" She turned her back on him, and taking Rod's arm pulled him out of the doors. "Please don't mind him—what he said, Mr. Herrick," she begged as they walked down the broad steps into the garden.

A wave of laughter swept out after them. Lyla felt the muscles of Rod's arm swell and grow into rock like hardness.

"How terribly strong you must be," she flattered as she sank gracefully into a wicker garden chair. She waved Rod into one beside her. "Now please try to forget Reggie's rudeness," she begged, "and tell me about yourself."

"There's nothing much to tell," Rod sighed. "At least nothing that would interest you."

"Well, you go ahead and tell me anyway," she commanded.

Slowly at first, then with increasing freedom as he sensed her interest in his recital he told her of his life in the rugged hills of his home state.

His father had taken out a homestead claim long before Rod was born, he told her, and after several years of bitter toil, had made it into a cattle ranch. From earliest childhood, Rod told her, he had worked with cattle, ridden horses, taken part in roundups, and done many other such things pertaining to ranch life.

During the winter his mother had made him attend school in Broken Arrow, the nearest town, which was fifteen miles away.

Through grade and high schools he related, he had ridden on his horse to and from school despite driving blizzards and everything else.

His mother's greatest desire, he explained, had been to see him thoroughly educated. She had died just as he was ready to enter college two years previously.

Although his father had felt that he would be of more service at home on the ranch than at the State University, Rod had insisted that he be allowed to attend.

On his twenty-first birthday, which had been a month ago, his father had given him a letter left by his mother with the provision that it be given him on the day he attained manhood.

The letter had disclosed the horror of the lonely ranch life which Rod's mother had suffered uncomplainingly. She begged him to strike out for himself, and not to allow his stern father to tie him to cattle raising in the desolate range country.

"I've not been able to figure out just what she meant," Rod told her, "but right or wrong I'm bound to try to do what she asked." His voice grew wistful as he continued: "But I love that country. It's big. It's a man's country. Why you ought to see the mountains in the early morning and at sunset. They're—they're just swell. And the air is clear and fresh—not like this awful gasoliny air in your town." He chuckled aloud. "But say, you should have heard my old man cuss when I told him I was coming here to finish school. He's tough, my father is, but way down deep he's got a fine, big heart. He just believes every man should stand on his own feet. When I left he told me that since I was so determined to get an education I need not depend upon him for any financial support. So I've got to find a job," he concluded whimsically.

Lyla had been silent, absorbed in his tale. "When you tell me about that glorious country out there," she told him, "it makes me realize just how futile life in the city is. We just live to dress and go places to be seen. We grub for money and don't care how we get it."

"My father is a politician. Folks say terrible things behind his back, but they almost kiss his feet when they meet him. Sometimes I wish I could get away from all of it—it's so false, so unreal."

Rod was fully at his ease with the girl by now. "Why don't you let me take you back out to Golden Arrow with me?" he asked half seriously.

"Golden Arrow . . . that's a lovely name," the girl mused. She laughed. "I might take you up on that one of these days."

They heard voices calling her name, she leaped to her feet hastily.

"Oh my dear," she exclaimed, "I'd completely forgotten my party. It's probably time for everybody to go home. What will they think of me?"

"Seems like I can't do anything but get you in trouble," Rod said ruefully. "I should have known better than to have kept you out here listening to my chatter all this time."

"Even if I wanted to stay?" Lyla demanded as they strolled toward the house. In the darkness she stumbled against him so that for an instant he held her in his arms to keep her from falling. Her nearness, her fragrance, her softness thrilled him.

"Little Lyla," he whispered, his shyness completely gone, "I do like you so!"

"And I like you, Rod," she returned softly, "ever so much." Her voice became crisp as they neared the

house. "Listen Rod," she murmured swiftly, "a bunch of us are going to the Swamp Hut, a cabaret after the party. I want you to go along. Will you?"

"I'll go anywhere with you," Rod told her. By now they were at the house where a group of Lyla's guests were waiting, with a furious Reggie sulking in back of them.

Gaily they teased Lyla, and Rod, and their swift, friendly banter made him feel a part of them. He grinned easily at their sallies, and totally ignored Reggie's fierce glances.

Only those guests who were cabaret bound remained in the house and they were putting on hats and coats. "Make it snappy, Lyla," one of them called. "It's three P.M. now and we've got to get along to the ole Swamp Hut you know."

Emboldened by Lyla's invitation, which had seemed to him to be really sincere, Rod brazenly took Lyla's arm as they went down the steps toward the cars. Reggie slouched sullenly along on the other side of them. The Durant car with its chauffeur stood purring at the curb. Rod helped Lyla in, and climbed in after her, almost stepping on his dis-

gruntled rival's feet. In the faint radiance of the small light which illuminated the interior of the handsome machine, Rod grinned faintly at Lyla as Reggie flung himself furiously in the car behind them and slammed the door viciously.

Wild, barbaric music swept pulsatingly out to meet Lyla's party as they entered the Swamp Hut. The

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