

The Pool of Flame

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Illustrations by Elsworth Young

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—The story opens at Monte Carlo with Col. Terence O'Rourke in his hotel. O'Rourke, a military free lance and something of a gambler, is dressing for appearance in the restaurant below when the sound of a girlish voice singing attracts his attention. Leaning out on the balcony he sees a beautiful girl who suddenly disappears. He rushes to the door to see a neatly gowned form enter the elevator and pass from sight.

CHAPTER II.—O'Rourke's mind is filled with thoughts of the girl, and when he goes to the gaming table he allows his remarkable winnings to accumulate indifferently. He notices two men watching him. One is the Hon. Bertie Glynn, while his companion is Viscount Des Trebes, a noted duelist. When O'Rourke leaves the table the viscount tells him he represents the French government and that he has been directed to O'Rourke as a man who would undertake a secret mission.

CHAPTER III.—At his room O'Rourke, who had agreed to undertake the mission, awaits the viscount. O'Rourke finds a mysterious letter in his apartment. The viscount arrives, hands a sealed package to O'Rourke, who is not to open it until on the ocean. He says the French government will pay O'Rourke 25,000 francs for his services. A pair of dainty slippers are seen protruding from under a Scotch curtain and the viscount charges O'Rourke with having a spy secreted there.

CHAPTER IV.—When the Irishman goes to his room he finds there the owner of the mysterious feet. It is his wife, Beatrix, from whom he has been away a year previous. They are reconciled, and opening the letter he had received, he finds that a law firm in Rangoon, India, offers him 100,000 pounds for an Indian jewel known as the Pool of Flame and tells him by a dining friend O'Rourke tells his wife that it is in the keeping of a friend named Chambret in Algeria.

CHAPTER V.—O'Rourke is forced to fight a duel with the viscount. The braggart nobleman is worsted in the combat and acts the poltroon.

CHAPTER VI.—The loyal wife bids O'Rourke farewell and he promises to soon return with the reward offered for the Pool of Flame. He discovers both Glynn and the viscount on board the ship which takes him to Algeria.

CHAPTER VII.—Chambret has left Algeria and O'Rourke has to gain a military detachment to cross the desert to reach his friend. As he finds the latter there is an attack by bandits and Chambret is shot.

CHAPTER VIII.—Chambret dies telling O'Rourke that he has left the Pool of Flame with the governor general of Algeria. He gives the colonel a signet ring at the sight of which he says the official will deliver over the jewel.

CHAPTER IX.—O'Rourke is attacked by Glynn and the viscount who ransack his luggage, but he worsts them in the scuffle.

CHAPTER X.—When he arrives at Algeria the Irishman finds the governor general away. He receives a note from Des Trebes making a mysterious appointment.

CHAPTER XI.—The viscount tells O'Rourke that he has gained possession of the jewel by stealing it from the safe of the governor general. He does not, however, know who has offered the reward for it. He suggests a duel with rapiers, the victor to get that information and the jewel.

CHAPTER XII.—In the duel O'Rourke masters his adversary and secures possession of the Pool of Flame.

CHAPTER XIII.—The efforts of O'Rourke are now directed toward speedily getting to Rangoon with the jewel and he starts by ship.

CHAPTER XIV.—He finds the captain of the vessel a smuggler who tries to steal the jewel from him.

CHAPTER XV.—The jewel is finally secured by the ship's captain and O'Rourke escapes to land.

CHAPTER XVI.—With the aid of one Danny and his sweetheart, O'Rourke recovers the Pool of Flame.

CHAPTER XVII.—O'Rourke again forms his plans to pursue his journey to Rangoon.

CHAPTER XVIII.—On board ship once more a mysterious lady appears who puzzles and interests the Irishman.

CHAPTER XIX.

The wanderer had come upon Mrs. Prynne but once since he had boarded the Panjab. That morning, himself early astray because of his vague misgivings, he had discovered her on the hurricane deck of the liner; an inconspicuous, slight figure in the shadow of a life-boat, leaning upon the rail and gazing with (he fancied) troubled eyes, out and across the waste below Ismailia.

Though she must have been conscious of nearing footsteps, she had not stirred, and he had passed on, gaining but a fugitive glimpse of a profile sweetly serious; nor had she appeared either at breakfast or luncheon. A circumstance which led him to surmise that she did not court observation: an idiosyncrasy which seemed passing strange in a woman so fair.

He told himself that she wore an air of watchfulness, of vague expectancy, as though she, like himself, brushed some untoward mishap; that tawdry had the manner of one definitely apprehensive, constantly on guard against some unforeseen peril. Yes, now, he asked himself, what could it be? What threatened her? And why? He dimly promised himself the pleasure of her acquaintance, relying on the rapid intimacy that springs up between strangers on a long voyage, with a still more indefinite intention of putting himself at her service in any cause that she might be pleased to name, provisionally: she must not go with his plans for reaching "in ninety days."

It was he was hoping to find dinner; but though the table was small, he talked

to see her in the saloon, at either the captain's, the chief officer's or the doctor's table; nor, so far as he could determine, was she taking the air on deck. Was it possible, then, that he had been right, that she had a reason equally as compelling as his own for secluding herself? Or, was it simply (and infinitely more probably) that Mrs. Prynne was indisposed, an enervated victim of excessive heat?

The latter conjecture proved apparently the right one, Mrs. Prynne failing to appear during the two following days, while the Panjab was rocking down the Red Sea channel; and O'Rourke grew interested enough (he had little else to occupy his mind, for a duller voyage he had never known) to give Danny permission to pursue his inquiries: with an injunction, however, prohibiting too lavish an expenditure of the boy's wealth of affection. Whereupon Danny returned with the information that the mistress of Cecile, the maid, was suffering from heat exhaustion.

This was entirely reasonable. O'Rourke accepted the demolition of his airy castles of Romance, laughed at himself, in part was successful in putting the woman out of mind; doubtless, in time, he would have done so altogether, had not the lady chosen to take the air the night that the Panjab negotiated the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb. For on that same night, O'Rourke, himself wakeful, was minded to sit up and watch the lights of Perim Island leave into view.

O'Rourke, in a deck-chair on the starboard side, well cloaked in the shadow of the deck above, watched the other passengers, one by one, quiet their chatter, yawn, stretch and slip below to stuffy staterooms.

He suffered a dreamy eye to rove where it would, greedy of the night's superb illusion.

Four bells—two o'clock— chimed upon his consciousness like a physical shock. He verified the hour by his watch and, reluctantly enough, agreed that it was time he got himself to bed. He half rose from his chair, then sank back with an inaudible catch of his breath. Without warning the apparition of a white-clad woman had invaded the promenade deck. For an instant he hardly credited his eyes, then, with a nod of recognition, he identified Mrs. Prynne.

Unquestionably unconscious of his presence in the shadow, she fell to pacing to and fro. Now and again, she stopped, and with chin cradled in her small hands, elbows on the rail, watched the approaching cliffs of Arabia; then, with perhaps a sigh, returned to her untimely constitutional.

Partly because he had no wish to startle her, partly because he was glad to watch unobserved (he had a rare eye for beauty, the O'Rourke), the wanderer sat on without moving, stirred only by active curiosity. The strangeness of her appearance upon deck at such an hour fascinated his imagination no less than her person held his eye. He gave himself over to vain and profitless speculation.

Why, he wondered, should she keep to her cabin the greater part of the evening, only to take the air when none might be supposed to observe her?

Why, if not to escape such observation? Then, he told himself, he must be right in his supposition that she had something to fear, someone to avoid. What or whom? What was it all, what the mystery that, as he watched her, seemed to grow, to cling about her like some formless, impalpable garment?

Events conspired to weave the man into the warp and woof of her affairs; more quickly than he could grasp the reason for his sudden action, he found himself a-foot and dashing aft at top speed. But an instant gone Mrs. Prynne had passed him, unmolested and wrapped in her splendid isolation; and then from the after part of the deck he had heard a slight and guarded cry of distress, and a small scuffling sound.

In two breaths he was by her side and found her struggling desperately in the arms of a lascar—a deck-hand on the steamer.

At first the strangeness of the business so amazed O'Rourke that he paused and held his hand, briefly rooted in action. For although it was apparent that she had been caught off her guard, wholly unprepared against assault, and while she struggled fiercely to break the lascar's hold, the woman still uttered no cry. A single scream would have brought her aid; yet she held her tongue.

The two, the woman's slight, white figure and the lascar's gaunt and sinewy one, strained and fought, swaying silently in the shadows, tensely, with the effect of a fragment of some disordered nightmare. But then, as the lascar seemed about to overpower his victim, O'Rourke, electrified, sprang upon the man's back. With one strong arm deftly he embraced the fellow, an elbow beneath his chin forcing his head up and back. With the other hand O'Rourke none too gently tore away an arm encircling the woman. Then wrenching the two apart, he sent a knee crashing into the small of the lascar's back, all but breaking him in two, and so flung him sprawling into the scuppers.

Without a word the man slid upon his shoulders a full half-dozen feet, while O'Rourke had a momentary glimpse of his face in the moonlight—dark-skinned and sinister of expression with his white, glaring eyeballs. Then, in one bound, he was on his feet again and springing lithely back to the attack: and as he came on a jagged gleam of moonlight ran like lightning down the sinuous and formidable length of a kris, most deadly of knives.

O'Rourke fell back a pace or two.

His own hands were empty; he had nothing but naked fists and high courage to pit against the lascar and his kris. Keenly alert, he threw himself into a pose of defence.

But O'Rourke had forgotten the woman; it was enough that he had made possible her escape, and he had no thought other than she had fled. It was, therefore, with as much surprise as relief that he caught the glimmer of her white figure as she thrust herself before him and saw the lascar bring up in the middle of a leap, his nose not an inch from the muzzle of an army Webley of respect-compelling caliber.

Simultaneously, he heard her voice, clear and incisive if low of tone: "Drop that knife!"

The kris shivered upon the deck. "Faith!" murmured the Irishman, "and what manner of woman is this, now?"

The lascar stood as rigid as though carved out of stone, long, gaunt legs shining softly brown beneath his cool



Found Her Struggling Desperately in the Arms of a Lascar.

dazzling white cummerbund, the upper half of his body lost in the shadow of the deck, a gray blur standing for his turban.

O'Rourke stepped forward, with a quick movement kicking the kris overboard, and would have seized the fellow but that the woman intervened.

She said decisively: "If you please—no."

Bewildered, O'Rourke hesitated. "I beg your pardon—" he said in confusion. She did not reply directly; her attention was all for the lascar, whom her revolver still covered. To him, "Go!" she said sharply, with a significant motion of the weapon.

The lascar stepped back, with a single wriggle losing himself in the dense shadows.

O'Rourke fairly gasped amazement at the woman, who, on her part, retreated slowly until her back touched the railing. She remained very quiet and thoroughly mistress of herself, betraying agitation only by slightly quickened breathing and cold pallor. Her eyes raked the deck on either hand: it was plain that she had no faith in the lascar, perhaps apprehended his return; yet her splendid control of her nerves evoked the Irishman open admiration.

"Faith!" he cried, breaking the tense silence, "'tis yourself shames me, madam, with the courage of ye!" She flashed him a glance, and laughed slightly. "Thank you," she returned. "I'm sure I don't know where I should be now but for you."

"'Twas nothing at all. But ye'll pardon me for suggesting that ye have made a mistake, madam."

"A mistake?" she echoed; and then, thoughtfully: "No, I shouldn't call it that."

"Letting him go, I mean. Neither of us, I believe, could well identify him. When ye report this outrage to the captain, whom will ye accuse?"

"I shall accuse no one," she said quietly, "for I shan't report the affair."

"Ye will not—" he cried, astounded. "Indeed, I am quite sincere: I shall do nothing whatever about it. It is, moreover, a favor which I shall ask of you, to say nothing of the matter to anyone."

O'Rourke hesitated, unwilling to believe that he had heard aright. "Believe me," she was saying earnestly, "I have good reason for making a request so unaccountable to you."

"But—but—Mrs. Prynne!" "Oh, you know me then?" she interrupted sharply. And her look was curious and intent.

"I—'tis—faith!" O'Rourke stammered. He felt his face burn. "Me valet told me," he confessed miserably. "'Tis a bit of flirtation he's been having with your maid, Cecile, I believe, madam."

"Ah, yes." She seemed unaccountably relieved. "You, then, are Colonel O'Rourke?"

He bowed. "Terence O'Rourke, madam, and at your service, believe me."

"I am very glad," she said slowly, eyeing him deliberately, "that, since I had to be aided, it came through one of whom I have heard so much—"

"Faith, Mrs. Prynne!" "And I thank you a second time, very heartily!" She offered him her hand, and smiled bewitchingly.

"'Tis embarrassing me ye are," he protested. "Faith, to be thanked twice for so slight a service! I can only wish that I might do more—"

"It is possible," she said, apparently not in the least displeased by his presumption—"It is possible that I may take you at your word. Colonel O'Rourke."

In her eyes, intent upon his, he fancied that he recognized an amused flicker, with, perhaps, a trace of deeper emotion: the kindling interest of a woman in a strong man, with whose signals he was not unfamiliar. Pride and his conceit stirred in his breast.

"'Twould be the delight of me life," he told her in an ecstasy. "Don't be too sure, I warn you, colonel." Her manner was now arch, her smile entirely charming. "It might be no light service I should require of you."

"Ye couldn't ask one too heavy. . . . But 'tis weary ye are, Mrs. Prynne?" he inquired, solicitous.

"Very." There was in fact an indefinite modulation of weariness in her voice. "I'm only a woman," she said faintly, with a little gesture of deprecation; "and my ways are hedged about with grave perils—"

"'Tis the O'Rourke would gladly

brave them all for ye, madam," he declared gallantly. "Command me—what ye will."

She lifted her gaze to his, coloring divinely there in the moon-glamor. He looked into her curiously bewitching eyes and saw there an appeal and a strange little tender smile. Her head was so near his shoulder that he was aware of the vague, alluring perfume of her hair. Her scarlet lips parted. . . . And he became suddenly aware that it behooved him to hold himself well in hand. It were an easy matter to imagine himself swept off his feet, into a whirl of infatuation, with a little encouragement. And he was not unsophisticated enough to fall to see that encouragement would not be lacking if he chose to recognize it.

"Faith," he told himself, "I'm thinking 'twould be wiser for me to take to me heels and run before . . ." He was spared the ignominious necessity of flight. In two breaths they showed two very different pictures. Now they stood alone on the dead white deck, alone with the night, the sea, the stars, the silence and the moonlight; O'Rourke a bit dismayed, and wary, but as curious as any man in such a case; the woman apparently yielding to a sudden fascination for him, swaying a little toward him as if inviting the refuge of his arms. . . . And now she started away, clutching at her heart, with a little choking cry of alarm; while beneath them the vessel was still quivering with a harsh yet deadened detonation like an explosion, together with a grinding crash and shriek of riven steel somewhere deep in the hold.

Inexpressibly dismayed, they stared with wide and questioning eyes at one another, through a long minute filled with an indescribable uproar: a succession of shocks and thumps in the interior of the vessel gradually diminishing in severity while, in a pandemonium of clamorous voices, the liner, like a stricken thing, hesitated in its southward surge, then slowly limped into a dead halt on the face of the waters.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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GREW SO FAT KEPT HIM AWAKE

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He planted the lettuce one evening after he quit work and had a mess for early morning breakfast next morning, but the leaves grew so fast and large that he could not use them without running them through a feed cutter.

His radishes were so juicy and tender that the neighbors complained of them because in a high wind the tops would break off and destroy the neighboring fences.

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