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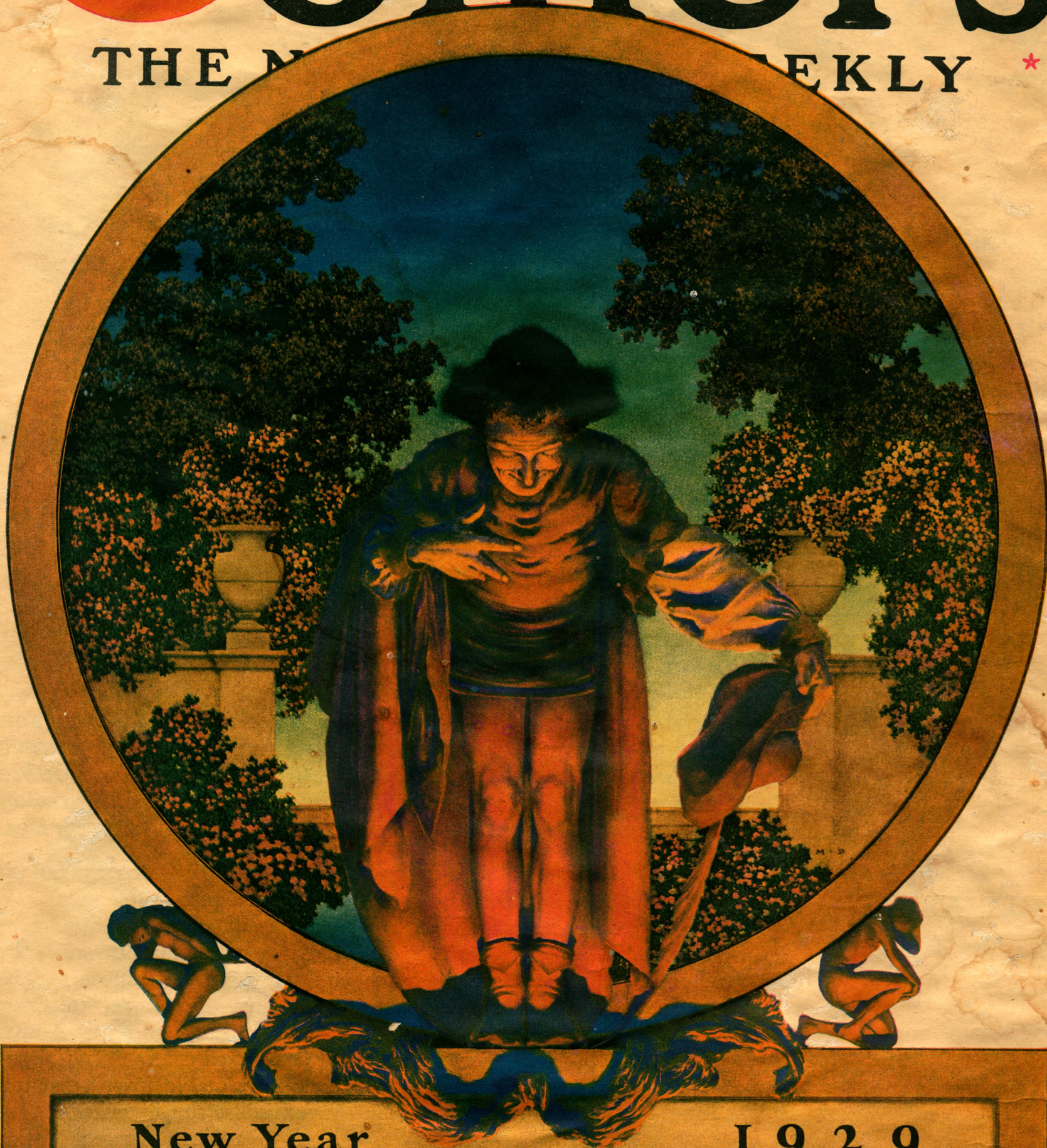
SHEPHERD OF
GUADALUPE P19
CONCLUSION

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THE NEW YORK WEEKLY ★



New Year 1929
The BEST is yet to COME

The Shepherd of Guadalupe

By Zane Grey



The Story Thus Far:

THE Forrests and Lundeen have always been enemies. Mr. Lundeen and a half-breed, Malpass, have by various crooked means acquired the Forrest wealth and home, Cottonwoods.

Young Clifton Forrest, back ill from the war, and Virginia Lundeen are fast falling in love though they do not admit it to each other.

Virginia's father is determined that she marry Malpass. Malpass threatens to ruin her father if she refuses. Virginia decides that the only way out is to marry Cliff and he readily agrees, feeling that he will not live long and therefore will not be a burden to Virginia. However, they separate immediately after the secret ceremony though the news comes out when Cliff gets into a fight with Malpass.

Whereupon both young people are turned out of their homes because of the marriage. Cliff gets a job as a shepherd to Don Lopez and takes his sheep south to Guadalupe Springs where he greatly improves in health and spirit and decides to remain a shepherd.

Virginia visits Ethel in Colorado and when she returns she sends for a mining engineer, Jarvis, to investigate the so-called silver mine from which Lundeen and Malpass are supposed to have made so much money. Jarvis finds the mine a fake. However, while they are at the mine, Malpass arrives, shoots Jarvis, who almost dies, and makes a grab for Virginia.

After a terrific fight during which they are both torn and hurt, she eludes him just as her father arrives. When he learns the truth he goes for Malpass. After a long fight, they both end up on the trestle outside the cabin—and both are killed.

In settling up the estate Virginia gives back Cottonwoods to Mr. Forrest and goes to live in her old home, where Ethel comes to visit her.

XI

ALITTLE while later, after donning comfortable clothes, in fact the same in which they had run and romped and climbed in Colorado, Virginia and Ethel went outdoors.

"I'm from Missouri," said Ethel, slangily. "You gotta show me. How big is this jungle?"

"About ten acres of grove, some valley meadowland, and 50 acres running up over the range."

"Not so poor, for Bertha, the Sewing-machine Girl."

Eventually they wound up tired and hot and happy on a shady knoll under a giant cottonwood that spread its wide branches on the valley. The view was open and the mountains stood out splendidly and close. But Cottonwoods could not be seen for trees. The irrigation ditch flowed down here and, by reason

of the little slope, made swift gurgling sound. There were innumerable bees humming over the stream, among the blossoms of a flowery vine.

Ethel gazed out over the meadow at the graceful, glistening horses. "Oh, what horses! You must take me riding every day. I miss riding so much at home in Denver. Sure, we're Western, but a horse is rare these days. . . . There's Calliope and Moses and Calamity. . . . Oh, I see your great black Sirius. Some horse! If only I could straddle that stallion! . . . And there's Dumpy—the little pinto that threw me. Darn his dusty hide! . . . Virginia, you can't be so awful poor, or you couldn't take care of those horses."

"I'M NOT so very poor that I can't give you a ride occasionally—and a wedding present in June," returned Virginia.

"You darling! Now if you go blow yourself on me I'll never forgive you. But it seems strange for you to be poor at all."

Ethel fell back with a sigh, her head in Virginia's lap. "Tell me your story backward."

"You mean from present to past?"

"Yes."

"Well, to begin with—Clifton is back," rejoined Virginia, averting her face.

"Back. Where'd he go?"

"When his father turned him out he became a sheep herder."

"What! Cliff Forrest a sheep herder? You mean a shepherd?"

"Yes," replied Virginia, dreamily.

"But isn't that a poor job for a white man—a college man—a soldier?"

"Poor, yes, in a matter of wages. But Cliff had no choice, and, besides, I think he went for his health."

"Say, Angel-face, turn round here and look at me," said Ethel.

Virginia complied.

"Oh," cried Ethel, "then all is not well between you and Cliff?"

"It is—for my part. But I've never seen him since that time—nor heard

from him. He drove the sheep south. . . . Upon my return from visiting you, I heard that Malpass was dickering with Don Lopez to buy the flock Clifton was driving. Malpass' motive was not solely a business one. He wanted to acquire possession of Lopez' flock so he could send a herder out to Guadalupe and throw Cliff out of his job. Leave him all that distance to come back alone and without supplies."

Ethel swore. "I'm sure going to get a kick out of your story of how your dad killed that hombre."

"It was horrible," said Virginia, her flesh creeping, and tears coming into her eyes. "Malpass shot Father I don't recall how many times. Five bullet holes, I think, the inquest reported. . . . But Father broke Malpass' arm—nearly tore it off—and then cracked his neck. . . . Dropped him off the high trestle."

"Served him right," replied Ethel, fiercely. "But never mind that now. Tell me more about Cliff."

"There's very little more. I borrowed money and bought the sheep from Lopez. And Cliff drove on to Guadalupe, never knowing."

"You amazing girl! All the time then—for it was early last fall when you left me—Cliff has been working for you."

"Yes. It's funny."

"Funny! It's great. Shepherd of his wife's flock! And never knowing. Say, darling, sure you raised his wages?"

"Don't giggle," entreated Virginia.

"I'm scared to death. . . . You see, Clifton has just come back. He must know now that all the winter—seven months—he has worked for me. . . . Sheep herders are poor. He'll need his wages. And if he doesn't come for them, what on earth shall I do?"

"Goose! Take them to him."

"**ETHEL**, I absolutely couldn't do that," expostulated Virginia. Then she felt a tender hand stealing up her arm, along her neck to her cheek.

"Look down at me, dearest," said Ethel, softly.

Virginia surrendered then and betrayed herself to the wild, shrewd, loving eyes of her friend.

"You love Cliff still?"

"Santa Maria!" he exclaimed, aghast. Virginia lay with her face to the wall of the tent and she dared not breathe

Illustrated by
Harold
Von Schmidt



"Still! What do you think I am?"

"I think you're an angel. . . . Then you love him more?"

"I don't know how much it was, but it's killing me now."

"Virginia! Why, for heaven's sake? You ought to be tickled pink. It's something to be able to love a man these modern days. Ask me. . . . Dear, are you concealing more from me?"

"I don't think so. Anyway, if I am it'll come out soon. You'd get blood out of a stone. . . . I'm just scared, Ethel. . . . It has been a long agony for me, since last fall. I'm all right now, except—I—he—oh, well, I want him, I want him—and if he doesn't want me—I'll drown myself in the ditch here."

"It's a cinch," yelled Ethel, ecstatically.

VIRGINIA wiped the dimness from her eyes and stared down at this galvanizing scion of modern feminism.

"Cinch?" she echoed, stupidly.

"That's what I said, Desdemona. You're so modest you make me sick. Good heavens, girl, I'll bet he went off on that sheep herder job just to think and dream about you. Of course you never had the nerve to give him a hint you loved him."

"I was so afraid I would it—it made me queer, cold. . . . But I led him on. And he asked me to marry him because he thought I wanted to use him as a convenience. To save me from Father's machinations with Malpass. . . . No, poor fellow, he never dreamed I was crazy to be his wife."

Ethel let out a peal of silvery, happy laughter. "Oh, it's rich. I'd love to be in your boots. Think of how glorious it'll be to tell him. I'd have had it done by now."

"Oh, you—you callous girl! How can I tell him?" cried Virginia.

"You've got eyes, arms, hands and lips all about as perfect as nature ever bestows upon a woman."

"That's nonsense. But suppose I have?"

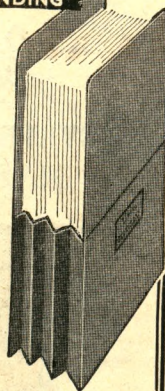
"Use them. You darned fool. Didn't you fight Malpass? Well, fight Cliff in another way. It's a woman's prerogative. We're no longer vassals of men. We don't have (Continued on page 46)

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The Shepherd of Guadalupe

Continued from page 19

to wait. But since we're so soft—since we have to love a man—since we must be mothers, it's self-preservation or destruction."

"Ethel, I sent for you to help me—not drive me mad," replied Virginia.

"Now, dearest Virginia, I am in dead earnest," returned Ethel, suddenly starting up. "I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world. I'm just taking an extreme view of your trouble. I don't really believe it's bad at all. I honestly think Cliff is as much in love with you as you are with him. And you bet I'll know after I see him."

"See him? Are you going to?"

"I am. Or I should say we are."

VIRGINIA covered her face with her hands. "Let us wait a little. He might come—to me. That would help so. . . . Ethel, you don't know all about it."

"Ahuh! I thought so. How can I help you when I don't know anything?"

"I am disgustingly rich," confessed Virginia. "Father's holdings in the south brought a great deal of money. And there's more to come. No one here except Mr. Forrest knows it. I made him swear not to give me away. I took this place in exchange for Cottonwoods. I kept a few horses, a car, and some help just so I wouldn't look too awfully poor. But that Payne ranch at Watrous is mine. All the rest of my horses are there. And there's other property in the estate. I simply can't conceal it for long. That's another thing that scares me."

"Mrs. Clifton Forrest, may I inquire why in the name of heaven that should scare you?"

"Clifton once said he could never take anything from me. And when he finds out I'm not poor—that I've barrels of money, he'll not want me."

"Then he'll be a darned queer *genus homo*."

"But, Ethel, you don't know Cliff."

"He belongs to the male species of our generation. You're his wife. You're a lovely thing—perfectly dippy about him. Considering these facts, I hardly think he'll cast you off when he finds you've got barrels of coin. Men are not that way."

A step on the dry cottonwood leaves startled Virginia, and even before she moved a familiar voice thrilled her:

"Howdy, daughter."

Leaping up, blushing scarlet, she saw Clifton's father right upon them.

"Oh, Mr. Forrest, you—you gave me a scare."

"Waal, I'm sorry. The cowboys steered me down here. I sort of hated bustin' up your pretty little party, but it's kind of important."

"Ethel, this is Clifton's father . . . my friend, Miss Wayne, from Denver."

"Think I once met you before, Miss, but I'm shore glad to meet you again," replied the rancher. "Suppose we all set down. It's nice here."

Forrest sat down with his broad back to the tree and laid his hat aside. Virginia had never seen him look so well. He was ten years younger. The somber shade had gone from the dark hazel eyes that were so poignantly like Clifton's. He was clean-shaven and neatly garbed.

"Waal, it shore ain't easy to begin this confab," he said, with a smile that made him winning. "But I reckon I've got to."

"I am all curiosity, Mr. Forrest," returned Virginia, who was thrilling all over. "Not to say sympathetic."

"Lass, I've been out to see Cliff," he announced tragically.

Virginia's hand flashed to her breast, and her eyes and lips must have added to that gesture.

"Aw, don't look scared. Cliff's all right," he added hastily. "Fact is I had the jar of my life. I never was so surprised. He's well! He's a strappin' big fellow, dark as an Indian. I just couldn't get over it. . . . Now, Virginia, for that good news you shore ought to call me dad, shouldn't you?"

"I—surely should—Dad," replied Virginia, huskily. She could have kissed him, and probably would have but for the tight hold Ethel had on her.

"Good! That will tickle Mother. Do you know, Virginia, I'm like to grow jealous of you. . . . Waal, Cliff wasn't surprised at all to see me. He was as nice an' kind as if I'd—as if nothin' had never happened between us. Asked all about Mother, an' shore wanted to see her bad. But he can't leave the sheep just now. An' I reckon Mother will have to go over to Sycamore."

"Oh, I hope she goes soon," burst out Virginia.

"Huh! Trust that little lady. Waal, I was pretty gingerly about tacklin' Cliff. You see, he had me buffaloed. There's sure been a vast change in that boy. So I beat around the bush, talkin' a lot, to get my wind."

"Did you speak—of me?" queried Virginia, breathlessly.

"I should smile. You were my best bet. First I told him you owned the sheep he'd been drivin'. He said Lopez had told him. An' then Cliff said it wasn't so good for him, as he needed his wages an' shore couldn't take money from you."

"Oh!" cried Virginia, poignantly, clinging to Ethel's comforting hand.

"An' I told him that was just as well, 'cause you was now a poor girl. He looked blank. Then he laughed. But I knocked him open-mouthed by tellin' him you had deeded Cottonwoods back to me. He cussed me, an' wanted to know how that could be. He'd never heard of your father killin' Malpass, an' then dyin' from gun-shots. That made him sober. He whispered: 'Poor Virginia!' An' then he wanted to know what had become of you."

"I told him how you'd gone to live where we used to. That you had a few horses, an old car, an' not much money. You'd have to sell the sheep presently. I could see he was sick about it, an' shore mad at me, but he didn't cuss me again. He sat there on the stump an' thought. Finally he looked up with the saddest eyes I ever seen an' said . . . What do you think he said?"

"I CAN'T imagine. Hurry," whispered Virginia.

"When did she divorce me?" he asked. I told him you hadn't divorced him at all. . . . 'My Gawd!' he said, an' showed me a letter some months old that he hadn't got till his shepherd lad fetched it out from San Luis. It was not signed, but I recognized Malpass' handwritin'. The letter told of you divorcin' him an' marryin' Malpass. . . . What a skunk an' greaser he was!"

"Oh, despicable! That's—the worst!" panted Virginia.

"Waal, it was good Cliff didn't get that letter way out on the desert, months ago. 'Cause it shore would have killed him."

"You—you think—Cliff cared?" asked Virginia, as if strangling to force utterance.

"Cared? My heaven, lass, the boy worshipped you. I saw that long ago, right after he first came back. Mother

put me on to it. . . . I hated you because of that very thing. I accused him of it. All the time I could see his heart in his eyes. . . . Waal, it shore hurts me to think of that now—for Cliff's love for you saved his life."

"Oh, it couldn't be!" cried Virginia.

"Don't take on so, lass. Shore, you must let me tell you. Most of all let me ask help of you."

"But you mustn't make such rash statements. I can't believe them. But I—I might. And then how could I bear—"

"Child, I'm tellin' you the truth," expostulated Forrest.

"Oh, how can you say that?"

"Cliff told me. Told me right out, just as cool an' calm as could be. He said, 'You needn't tell her, Dad. No use to distress her further. Her heart is big, an' I don't want her sorry for me.' . . . Waal, then I—"

"You—you—" gasped Virginia, who divined what was coming.

"Shore. I told him plumb straight that it wasn't all to get free of Malpass you married him."

Virginia, in default of vocal powers, squeezed Ethel into asking: "And then what did Cliff say?"

"Waal, Dad," he said, cool an' easy, 'you never was very strong in the head. An' I'll thank you not to talk that way. Especially to anyone else.' It shore flabbergasted me, so I shut up. But I was deep-stirred an' I asked him to forgive me for disgracin' him an' turnin' him out when he was ill an' crippled. . . . My Gawd, it hurt me to ask. That was damnin' me black. But once I got it out I felt better."

"Did he forgive you?" asked Virginia.

FORREST showed emotion. "Never a harsh word, lass. He told me, yes, an' that it made him happy to have everything straightened out. But he added that he expected me to forgive you too. An' I said I had done that long ago. Waal, that nerved me for the last, an' I begged him to come home to Cottonwoods!"

"He refused," divined Virginia.

"No, Dad," he said, simply, 'I can't do that. I'll see Mother often when I'm here, an' you too, if you want, but my home is the desert henceforth.' I wanted to rave an' swear. A sheep herder! My son, Clifton! A sheep herder like those peons! . . . But somethin' about him nailed my lips. You'll feel it when you see him."

"See Clifton! I'll never have the courage now," moaned Virginia.

Forrest's face fell. "Lass, you love him, don't you?"

She made a hopeless, helpless gesture more eloquent than any affirmation.

"You're my last card, Virginia," he went on. "If you can't persuade Cliff to come back to us—Mother an' you an' me—I'm ruined, an' it'll finish Mother."

"I would persuade with the last drop of my heart's blood," flashed Virginia, passionately, "if it would be of use. But I know Clifton Forrest. He is beyond us."

"Lass, I felt that too. But you ain't takin' into account the one big factor. If he learns you love him—from your own lips—he will come back to us. But at that, I think he'll stick to the sheep an' the desert. I'll never forget him when he said, 'I'm a sheep herder.' You'd think he thought he was President. . . . Waal, lass, I've laid my cards on the table, an' you've got the ace. Will you play it for us?"

"I'll do anything," answered Virginia, feeling herself abandoned to the fates, now aloft on the pinnacle of hope and again lost in the depths of despair.

Forrest kissed her hand with quaint old courtesy.

"A man ought to be grateful and humble. *Quien sabe?* Who knows, as the Mexicans have it? I once showed you my door—insulted you. To my endless shame and regret. Today nothing could do me more honor—make me happier than to have you cross my threshold again as the wife of my son."

NEXT morning she felt herself to have some semblance to a rational being, and reinstated herself in Ethel's intellectual regard. Both of them, however, were disrupted out of a possible even tenor by a message from Helen Andrews, which was brought in by Jake. Helen, on the way to Phoenix to visit her brother, had stopped off at Las Vegas to see Virginia.

"Isn't that perfectly dear of her?" exclaimed Ethel.

"Indeed it is. . . . I forgot to write her."

"Virginia, you were a jealous cat. But that girl was true blue."

"I really loved her. Only, Ethel, in my trouble I forgot everybody save you—Hurry and dress. We'll drive in to town."

And this was how it came about that Virginia, late in the day of friendship, though not too late, found another loving and steadfast heart.

The following morning Helen motored out in her riding clothes, as planned, and the three had a glorious run on the horses. After luncheon Virginia's guests mysteriously disappeared.

It set Virginia to pondering. When they did not come back soon she went out to look for them. Nowhere in the grove! She fled to the barn, to confront Jake and Con at work on the horses that had been ridden.

"Jake, have the girls been here?" she queried.

Now to Virginia's knowledge no cowboy was a good liar. She saw through Jake in a second, and as for honest Con, he could not lie.

"What horses did you saddle?"

"I shore let them have Dumpy and Calamity Jane without your orders. Honest to Gawd, though, I thought you was goin' too. Not till they rode off like mad did I take a tumble."

"Which—way did they—go?" asked Virginia, very weakly.

He pointed. "First they asked how to find Sycamore, and I told them. They rode out the lane and up the hill."

After the first shock had passed, Virginia realized that it was due only to her supercharged emotional capacity these trying days. Before she got back to the welcome shade trees she was divided between elation and gloom. Trust that sharp-eyed little Wayne lady! That was the terror of the thing, because after Ethel had seen Clifton there would never again be any doubts as to his status as a lover and husband.

If she had been on a rack of the Spaniards she could have held herself quieter than on this interminable fiendish afternoon. She had been warped out of her orbit. She fluttered like a leaf of an aspen tree. But at last they came.

Virginia had not been able to breathe inside the house. She had carried blanket and pillow out under the cottonwood where Clifton's father had told his story. But never until she espied the girls coming through the grove from the barn and she sat down, and then her legs gave way under her.

How slowly they came! Guilty wretches! But Ethel was radiant and Helen resembled the glorious Helen of ancient romance. The panic of dread, at least, stilled in Virginia's breast.

They could not be so callous as to look so marvelously mysterious and angelic if they had bad news.

Helen threw sombrero, gloves and whip to the turf, and she dropped on her knees before Virginia. Never had she looked so beautiful. Her face had the tint of a golden pearl and her eyes the sweetness of violets. Virginia had not before seen this Eastern woman under the influence of powerful emotion. Her classic beauty had never lacked soul, but now it bore the glow of grave wonder and joy, of a woman's divine understanding of what life or death meant to her friend.

"He loves you, Virginia. You have been blessed by the gods," she said softly.

"We found Clifton a wondrously changed man," said Helen, speaking with the solemn gladness of one who had been exalted by deeper insight into human life, or confounded by a spiritual transformation. "I pray that your desert can do as much for my brother Jack. I have faith that it can. But far more than recovery of health and strength has come to Clifton."

"He has seen through death, Virginia. I felt so slight before him. No one could ever tell what he has gone through. But you know he has conquered self, cast out evil, seen the pitiful frailty of men and women, of our fleeting time here, of the unknown future. He is like the Shepherd we read of in our childhood. . . . I felt ashamed to be deceitful before him—to probe at his heart, as this merciless Ethel wanted me to do and did herself. . . . Just the mention of your name—Virginia—betrayed him to me. How you have wronged him not to know! All women are loved some time or other, or often, or once anyway. But this soldier—this sheep herder—has surrounded you with his soul. . . . I think I understand men."

"My sweetheart went to war, the same as Clifton. He went a rollicking, happy-go-lucky chap. But the war changed him. His letters over a period of months told of a tremendous cataclysm of mind and heart, of spirit and faith. These letters have sustained me to bear his loss. . . . I felt in Clifton something of what Richard wrote me. These men stand apart. We can never understand them wholly. But the war built or it destroyed. Mostly the latter, alas! . . . I don't understand the desert. But so long as I live I shall never forget Clifton Forrest."

VIRGINIA, almost blinded, clasped Helen in an unutterably grateful embrace, passionate and eloquent.

"You too, Ethel," she said, presently, when she could speak. And it was reproachful acceptance of more just crucifixion.

But Ethel, despite the gravity of the occasion, in her excitement reverted to type:

"Just listen to me a minute, will you? Clifton could cut out my fellow in two winks of a cat's eye. Do you get that, Virginia, old dear?"

"Yes, I get it, Ethel. I know how you'd exaggerate and lie, and swear false witness to heaven itself to spare me. But don't spare me. I am dizzy with the ecstasy Helen inspired in me. But tell me of him."

"I didn't know him when he came up out of the gorge," returned Ethel, swiftly. "I didn't, yet I did. He appeared tall, but maybe that was because he walked erect. His color was a shiny dark gold. Face, arms, neck all bare. He might as well not have had a shirt at all, it was so ragged. And his trousers had a thousand patches, all kinds and shapes, some of them sheepskin. He wore a belt with a knife, and he carried a long stick, a shepherd's

(Continued on page 48)

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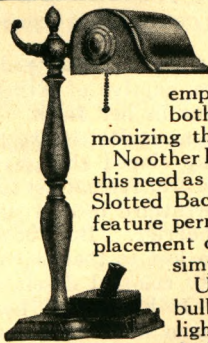
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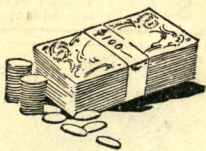
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(Continued from page 47)

crook. . . . Well, he knew us both. Wasn't surprised even a little. 'Howdy, girls!' As glad and kind as you'd want to see. . . . He asked why you didn't come, just as cool and natural-like. "So he asked for me!" murmured Virginia and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Don't faint, honey. You know I can't stand indifference or aloofness from any man. And for you I was not standing it either. Cliff was exactly that. He was just indifferent. And I went after him. . . . Virginia, he has the purest, clearest eyes, the most eagle-like look, the finest face I ever saw on a man. Almost he is beautiful. But the cold flint is there—the desert. . . . I told him about your sufferings since that tragedy which freed you from tyranny. Of your sacrifice to his father. I lied like a trooper about your poverty. But, however he may have satisfied our Helen here, he sure didn't me till I told him—well, never mind what I told him, but he came across with what I wanted."

"And that?" whispered Virginia. "I had to see where we stood in this deal. . . . Virginia, if you look at that fellow once now—and touch him with your little finger—he'll grab you in his arms and eat you up and—"

"Oh, hush!" cried Virginia, faintly. "Dear friends, don't tell me any more. I believe I will do what you tell me. . . . And if you're wrong you can drape me like Elaine and lay me to rest here under this old cottonwood."

"Then it is settled," returned Helen, rising flushed and happy. "I shall leave for Phoenix in the morning. Let us all plan to foregather next June in Denver, when this precocious madcap gives her promise for better or worse—to learn men have always been the masters and ever will be."

So in the golden sunset light under the cottonwoods they passed on arm in arm to the house.

LIKE one in a dream Virginia rode out on the range, captive of Ethel, blind and tumultuous in her faith.

How the range shone under the western sun! Far away sloped the gray desert, dim and obscure, retreating toward the west. Northward heaved the bronze mountain barrier. But both range and mountain lost to their rival—this strange empty colorful desolate void called desert. It had saved her lover. She must learn how and why, and forever reverence it as a manifestation of God. Some day she might ride far across it, down and down toward that purple haze, to Guadalupe.

"We will ride up under cover of the cedars there," said Ethel, bringing Virginia back to reality. "Then we can peek down into Sycamore and see the sheep grazing. Some class of a picture, old dear."

Presently, then, Virginia was gazing down into a wide beautiful valley, mostly green, but ribbed with amber bars, and rendered pastoral by a long straggling white flock of sheep. Her flock! But where was her shepherd?

"Come. I've called you twice," said Ethel. "We must go back of the hill and round to the head of that draw. There we can hide our horses. The sheep are working up to the camp. We've no time to lose, if we're to beat Cliff to it. Come, you old white-faced coward."

It seemed an age, though it was scarcely a quarter of an hour, when Virginia followed on Ethel's swift heels, through fragrant sage and among gray boulders, into a narrow defile, and through that to an open high bench graced by old sycamores, under one of which a white tepee tent gleamed red-gold in the sunset glow.

"Good!" whispered Ethel, in high exultation. How her eyes shone! "The coast is clear. I'll hide here and watch. Go now. Hurry to get in his tent. . . . Virginia, you're his wife. . . . Beat it now."

She gave Virginia a hasty hug and warm kiss and then a shove.

Virginia looked around to find she was alone. She ran, her heart in her throat. The action lent wings to a thousand thrills. From somewhere deep in her came courage, too. She must hide from Clifton, and for the moment it was not the thought of surprising him that dominated. Still Ethel's suggestion landed her at the door of the little tent. She slipped in panting.

She had a picture in her mind of this interior, precisely as she found it. Only the reality had the fragrance of fresh sage and cedar and the potency of intimacy. There was his bed, neatly made, though it consisted only of sheep skins on boughs, with a blanket folded back. She touched them, and it was as if she had been caressed.

Dogs barked outside. She heard the bleating of sheep, the pattering of many tiny feet. But she could not see either dogs or sheep.

Suddenly a tall form hove in sight coming up over the bench. The sunset light shone brightly on the man—a shepherd, stalking bareheaded, with a staff in his hand. He had a ragged, wild look. Virginia's eyes devoured him. How lithe and dark! How queer the patched trousers of many hues. He strode nearer up to the camp, to lean his crooked staff against a tree. Then he turned so the light fell upon his face. Clifton! But transformed, as he had seemed in her dreams. She fell upon his bed, but not from pretense.

SUDDENLY the quivering of her body ceased. Too late! His step sounded close. Blood and nerve and muscle became inert. The canvas whipped.

"Santa Maria!" he exclaimed, aghast. A silence ensued. Virginia lay on her side, face to the tent wall, and she did not breathe.

In This Issue

AT SEA. By William O'Brien. The first chapter of a thrilling mystery solved aboard an outbound freighter . . . Page 5

WHAT ABOUT 1929? By Roger W. Babson. Business forecasts by a famous financial weather man . . . Page 8

LISTEN, LESTER! By Samuel Merwin. A theatrical melodrama of villainy and love produced without rehearsal . . . Page 10

OLD SNIFF. By Peter B. Kyne. A fine story of an equally fine dog . . . Page 12

MARRIAGE FOR TWO. By Arthur Somers Roche. A new novel of marital intrigue, with synopsis . . . Page 14

GOLD LUST. By Scotty Allan. Tales of the Klondike told by a member of Byrd's polar expedition . . . Page 16

SHORT. By Maxwell Smith. The story of a cashier's bluff . . . Page 17

WHITE GOLD. By Octavus Roy Cohen. A short short story . . . Page 18

THE SHEPHERD OF GUADALOUPE. By Zane Grey. The conclusion of an absorbing novel with complete synopsis . . . Page 19

THE KID'S CLEVER. By Gus Edwards. The finale of a Broadway biography . . . Page 20

TWINKLE, TWINKLE. In Pictures . . . Page 22

HOLDING THE HEIGHTS. By Grantland Rice . . . Page 24

HOW WOULD YOU PLAY IT? By Milton C. Work . . . Page 28

TOM MASSON SAYS . . . Page 30

HOOVER'S HERITAGE. By The Gentleman at the Keyhole . . . Page 34

COLLIERGRAPHS . . . Page 38

DOUSING THE SPARKS. By Jack Binns . . . Page 42

EDITORIAL . . . Page 50



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"Are you ill, lady, that you . . . Who are you?"

The voice was Clifton's and it unlocked her petrified functions. His hand fell upon her shoulder. With the contact every nerve and vein in her leaped to stinging, pulsing life. As he rolled her over her hands flew instinctively to hide her face.

"Who are you?"

"It's your—wife!" She had been coached and driven to that infantile speech. How idiotic! She longed for a hole to open in the ground to swallow her.

Strong hands exposed her face, lifted her to her knees—and she saw Clifton perilously close, the radiant sunset light upon him. For a moment the mother in her dominated, and her hand tenderly touched his cheek, that appeared dusky yet strangely pale, and then slipped to his clustering hair.

"It is you! Changed beyond belief. But I know you. . . . Clifton, well and strong! Oh, thank God!"

HIS arm slipped round her waist and clasped tight to draw her close, while his free hand, under her chin, tilted up her head.

How stern his eyes! Clear, hazel, eagle-keen, with a blaze in their depths.

"Virginia?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Yes. Don't you know me?"

"What does this mean? My father comes to prate of you. . . . Then these friends of yours. And now you!"

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"My God, woman! Would you play with fire?"

"Oh, Clifton, indeed I would, if—"

"You never freed yourself?"

"Never—and never will."

"Virginia Lundeen!"

"No. My last name is Forrest."

"Still my wife!"

"Yes, Cliff."

"I am in a maze. . . . Virginia, you married me to escape that half-breed Malpass."

"Yes, but that was not my main reason."

"What was?" he asked, incredulously.

"I just wanted to—to belong to you."

"You—you—oh, I cannot say it!" he cried, huskily.

"Yes, Cliff, all my life, mostly. Since I was a girl. . . . At least since you kissed me that time."

He uttered a cry of commingled rapture and incredulity and fear.

"On the ship? On the train? That day in the store? And that night on the trail when you found me crawling, almost dead?"

"Yes, yes. Then, and the night I led you to propose to me—and the night you married me. Yes, and every day and every night since then I've loved you with all my mind and soul and heart and body."

"You glorious girl! . . . Oh, God. I have fought and lived for this!" It was then Ethel's prediction was verified. He seemed fire and ice, savage and man all at once. The breath was crushed out of her body, and every mad longing she had ever had for his kisses was satisfied. They left her limp and numb. But she felt that he had spent himself, though he held her still. Gradually she sank with him to a seat on the bed, and when she recovered sufficiently to see and understand it seemed that Clifton was staring at the setting sun as a man to whom heaven had opened.

"But you've not told me," she whispered.

"Virginia, I love you," he replied, divining her hunger.

"Oh, Cliff—Oh, Cliff! . . . You don't have to propose to me—do you?"

"No? Why don't I?"

"Because I'm your wife."

"So you are," he replied, marveling,

while his arm tightened. "I can't realize."

"Dearest, it is true. And at last I am happy. . . . Clifton, do not look so dazed. I will be guided by you. I am a woman who will obey. I do not ask you to give up your desert and your sheep. They are yours because they are mine, and all I have is yours. I shall love what you love. Your life and religion shall be mine."

"You will let me divide my time between the desert and home?"

"Let you? I implore you to. Your father and mother need you. They are growing old. So little will make them happy now."

"Virginia, don't shame me. I will do it."

She kissed his cheek. "You must teach me to love the desert. I understand a little the terror life has been to you. And how the naked earth, the elements, solitude and privation have worked this miracle. Perhaps these things are God. Anyway, I reverence them."

She got to her knees again and slipped her arms round his neck and kissed him again and again.

"Ethel's way, darling," she whispered, with a shaky laugh. "She is wise. She sent me here. God bless her! . . . Cliff, I've a confession."

"Don't make it. Let me dream on. I am at Guadaloupe and you are with me."

"Will you take me there some day?"

"Child, you could never walk that long, long trail."

"But I could ride. Promise me."

And she bent to his lips again, and would not desist until he promised.

"Cliff, I'm an impostor."

"Are you? Explain."

"You believe me poor white trash now?"

"Virginia, such a question!"

"Well, at least they told you I was poor, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"It's a lie. I am rich. I returned Cottonwoods and more to your father. Then I went to live in your—our old home. I love it there. I meant to pretend to be poor. But I can't lie to you. Father's estate was cleared and came to me. It was in Father's will. I paid every claim I could find, and some that were surely questionable. Yet still there was a fortune left. . . . What do you think about it?"

"I hardly know," he returned in perplexity.

"DO YOU love me any the less because I'm not the poor ragged bare-legged Virginia Lundeen who used to waylay you?"

"I couldn't love you less because of anything."

"You'll let me keep it, then?" she queried gravely.

"Let you, child? I'm very glad you have it. Could I support you in luxury on a few cents a day? Buy your exquisite clothes? Take care of your horses?"

"No, indeed, you couldn't. Then that is settled. Oh, how it worried me!"

From outside the tent rose a high sweet trilling laughter, wild and gay and exultant on the night air.

"Ethel—the little devil!" ejaculated Virginia, aghast. "She was with me. She's slipped up and listened."

"Let her," he replied, happily, and he spoke louder: "She was at considerable pains to let me know how poor you were. . . . That laugh now! . . . Well, Virginia Lundeen Forrest, you can buy me all the flocks on the range and I'll glory in driving them for you."

Virginia's modesty went into eclipse and she leaned to him murmuring: "My sheep herder!"

THE END



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