

Stair 9
Sand
P. 13

Curwood 32

MCCALL'S

LEN 61

MARCH
1928

TEN CENTS



A
New
Novel
by
**ZANE
GREY**
also ~

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MARCH

McCALL'S

1928



"The brothers quarreled fiercely in the town of Ehrenberg, and then came the bitter fight at Picacho"

*The West's great novelist finds in a woman's
unquestioning love the theme for his
newest masterpiece*

STAIRS of SAND

By Zane Grey

Author of: "Riders of the Purple Sage,"
"The Light of Western Stars," "The
Wanderer of the Wasteland," "Desert Bound"

ILLUSTRATED BY DANIEL CONTENT

THE canyon, with its gleaming walls, dark as ebony on the shady side, gold where the desert sun burned, afforded some relief from the heat, if not from the sight of the infernal endless sand—sand blowing, shifting, heaving like billows of a silver sea, rolling away dune after dune, rising in steps, beautiful, mystic, beckoning toward the cool blue heights—stairs of sand, treacherous and alluring.

Ruth Virey settled back in the wagon seat and dragged her gaze from that canyon gateway, through which the desert seemed to mock her.

Old Butch, the mule on the right, had balked. After thirty miles of travel he had become as immovable as the cliff of rock. Ruth had heard he was noted for balking, at strange times and places. He drooped now beside his mate, weary, sand-laden, obstinately set in his tracks.

The young man, Ruth's companion, had evidently abandoned any hope of starting the mule. He had coaxed,

pulled and beaten, all to no avail. Then he had flung himself down in the shade, where he now sat wiping his wet brown face, and pushing back his long damp hair with nervous hand. A radiance had faded from that youthful face.

"Hal Stone, do you mean we are stuck here?" re-

peated Ruth, this time sharply.

"Well, I guess, for to-day anyhow," he replied, grimly. "Old Butch won't budge till he gets ready."

"How far have we come?" she went on, quickening.

"I'm not sure. Maybe thirty miles."

"If so we're still ten miles from the Indian settlement where you said we could stay all night?"

"Yes, about that, I guess," he returned, avoiding her steady gaze.

"And from there, two days more to San Diego?"

"I didn't say so."

"Yes, you did," she flashed.

"Well, since you ran off with me—of your own free will—what difference does it make, whether it's two miles or ten?" he retorted, defiantly.

"That depends on you," she rejoined, gravely. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I won't go back. Can't we walk on to the Indian

settlement? We're not so tired we can't do that easily."

"No. It's too late in the day. The cursed sand is still blowing. After dark I'd not be sure of the road."

"What can we do?" she asked, after a long pause.

"Stay here till old Butch wants to move. We've water, food, blankets. We can make out quite well."

"I did not expect to camp out with you—alone, on the desert," declared Ruth.

"What did you expect?" he asked, almost harshly.

"God only knows. I never thought of anything except to get away from that awful hole—and from him."

Stone rose to approach her and lean over the front wheel.

"Well, you've gotten away, and you won't go back. Isn't it about time now to think of me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Ruth Larey. You let me make love to you—kiss you," he burst out. "You said you would love me. You've run away with me."

"I know, Hal," she returned, contritely, reaching out as if to give him her hand again. "I'm to blame. But can't you see it with my eyes? You happened along. I was lonely, sick of the desert, distracted. I—I think I did love you. And I was certainly glad to run off with you. But I never would have—if I'd suspected you'd be so selfish and swift in—in your demands."

"Humph! you're a funny woman," he said, with faint sarcasm. "Lead a fellow to risk his hide by eloping with you—then flout him when he wants what he had a right to expect."

Ruth's self-reproach, that had prompted her toward warmth, suffered an eclipse. This escapade of hers, which had promised deliverance, began to take on another aspect. She had thought to escape the desert, as she had yearned to for years, but the desert had betrayed her. Dare she go farther with this young man, whom she had known only a few weeks, and therefore not at all? Could she force herself to return to Lost Lake? Almost anything would be preferable. Remembrance of the freighting post in its ghastly setting, and the man she hated and feared roused such revulsion that she shook.

Meanwhile Stone lifted the canteens and baskets, and a roll of blankets out of the wagon, and carried them to a flat rock at the base of the shaded cliff. Then he re-

turned to help her out of the high-wheeled vehicle.

Ruth stood up, and leaned to reach his hands, intending to jump down, but he pulled her, and she stumbled on the wheel and fell into his arms. Then he swung her away toward the cliff, unmindful of the undignified display of her apparel.

"Put me down," she commanded.

Not only did he not comply with her demand but he clasped her close and bent low, trying to kiss her lips. Ruth, suddenly furious, beat at him, and wrestled so effectively that his kisses fell upon her neck and hair. She had to fight then to free herself.

"I—thought—you were—a gentleman," she cried, in breathless anger.

Stone laughed and spread wide his hands. The heat died out of his face.

"I don't know that it matters," he said. "Here we are. It'll be fine if you kick like a lassoed jack-rabbit every time I touch you."

Ruth smoothed her dishevelled hair and garments, striving the while to hold her tongue. She had gotten herself into a dilemma from which it would take a woman's wit to extricate her.

"I'll see if I can find some wood to start a fire," he added, and strode down the canyon.

Ruth sank upon the roll of blankets, conscious of weariness and disgust, and a miserable sense of the return of the very bitterness and futility that had betrayed her to this step. Whatever she had felt for this boy had vanished, even the regret. Again, for the hundredth time, it seemed, she had mistaken something for love—love that she yearned for and which she needed so greatly. She blamed the interminable four years of fruitless life at a barren desert water-hole for the vacillation and desperation which had all but ruined her.

"I swore I'd run away from it all and never go back," she mused, broodingly. "But already I see . . . it was wicked of me to desert Grandfather. He needs me. Long ago, but for me, he'd have been at the mercy of Guerd Larey and that scar-faced Collishaw . . . It'll be best to go back, though I hate it so . . . Oh, if I could only give up and not care. But neither Mother nor I was born to stand this awful desert life. It takes peace of soul—sacrifice—strength in God—qualities, alas! I

never had. And Mother, she—she found an unmarked grave in Death Valley. Oh, what will become of me!"

Presently she became aware of Stone's return. He carried a scant bundle of sticks.

"Tears, eh?" he queried, with hard blue eyes on her face. "I didn't know you could cry. I sure am flattered."

"My tears are not for you," rejoined Ruth, dispiritedly.

"Nor your smiles and kisses, I gather," he flared sullenly. "Well, we'll have it out right here, before old Butch makes up his mind to move."

"Hal, we don't need to have it out—whatever you mean by that," returned Ruth. "For I'm not going on with it."

"What?" he demanded, harshly, throwing down the sticks.

"We'll not go any further. You can take me home."

"Take you home . . . Go sneaking back to Lost Lake for Guerd Larey to make a sieve out of me with bullets. Ha, senora, I see myself taking you!"

"Guerd will believe me when I tell him I was solely to blame."

"What difference would that make to him? He'd kill me for taking you off, just the same."

Ruth reflected that it was likely Larey would not be influenced by her in the slightest, except on terms to which she would not surrender.

"I shall go back alone," she announced.

"How, may I ask?" he queried.

"I'll walk."

"Walk! When? You'd lose your way at night, and by day you'd fall on the hot sand and die. Haven't your four years of desert life—which you rave about—taught you that much? No, Ruth Larey, you'll go on with me. It's too late."

"It is never too late. That is why I have fought and fought. I shall walk back, Hal."

"Ruth, you'd risk your life rather than get out of this inferno with me?" he asked, with poignant amaze.

"I'd lose my life before I'd go," she returned.

"Why for God's sake?" he went on, hoarsely.

"You compel me to face the reality of such a step," she said, earnestly. "I think I have labored under a dream. I dreamed of you as a [Turn to page 113]



"Your mother bade me seek you, find you, and save you from such a fate as hers had been"

STAIRS OF SAND

[Continued from page 14]

liberator whom I would come to love. You would take me far across this terrible desert to the green vineyards and the pine groves—to the cool seaside. Some day when I was free you'd marry me and make me happy. That was my dream. But you have shown me the reality, and I want none of it."

"Curse your fickleness!" he exclaimed, passionately. "You're as changeable as the shifting sands out there. You've fooled me as you have every white man who drifted into Lost Lake . . . You've done this thing before, Ruth Larey."

"Thank you for all that, Hal Stone," replied Ruth, with a pale smile. "You have done me a good turn. I was grateful to you, sorry for you, and full of regret. But you have spared me further concern."

"I don't want your gratitude or your pity," he said. "It was your love I wanted. But I'll have you just the same. They told me you weren't in love with your husband—that he didn't care for that just so long as he—"

"I told you I was Guerd Larey's wife in name only," she interrupted, coldly.

"Sure you told me," he shot back at her, his face flushing hot. "But I believe you lied. You can't expect me to swallow that. I never knew anybody who could, except old Mrs. Dorn. . . . Guerd Larey to let you be his wife in name only! . . . No, Ruth, you invented that little story to make it easier for men to want you. It sure fooled me."

"I despise you. I wonder I ever imagined otherwise," returned Ruth, scornfully.

Ruth sought to conceal a dread that swiftly succeeded her scorn. Had she been wise to alienate this young man, in whom passion and violence evidently ran counterpart to his recklessness? Her situation had assumed alarming proportions. The afternoon was far spent, and despite her courage she hesitated about taking the road back. There would be early moonlight. Suddenly she decided that it would be best for her to leave Stone at once. She would take only a canteen and walk as long as she could make out the road, then rest until daylight.

She rose, and picked up a canteen and spread the canvas strap to sling over her shoulder. Stone stared at her until suddenly his eyes dilated and his face changed. Slowly he got to his feet.

"What dodge are you up to?" he demanded.

"I'm going back," replied Ruth firmly, though her lips trembled. Suiting the action to the words she wheeled and started away.

She heard a muttered curse, then quick footsteps on the gravel. Stone caught her arm in a grasp that hurt. Wrenching free she turned and struck him with all her might across the mouth.

"You keep your hands off me," she cried. "You didn't say that last night," he muttered, extending toward her the hands she had found offensive. And he clutched at her dress.

Suddenly over his shoulder Ruth saw two men and two burros entering the canyon at its far end. Their amazing appearance changed what had been a hopeless situation for her. Fiercely, with redoubled strength, she fought Stone, and spared breath for one piercing cry. And she gave Stone all he could do to handle her.

The moment came, just when she was about to collapse, when something heavy and irresistible laid hold of Ruth from behind. A great brown hand shoved Stone back and held him as if he had been an empty sack. Ruth grasped then that one of the men she had seen had come up behind her.

"Young man, let go—quick!" he said in deep voice that had a curious cold ring.

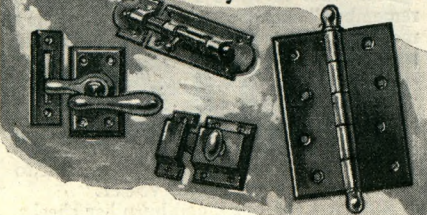
But Stone did not release his hold of Ruth. His mood had been too savage to change in a twinkling. Then the brown arm flashed back and forth. Stone's face seemed suddenly obliterated behind a huge fist. Ruth felt herself freed. Stone fell backward, and rolled against the cliff wall where he sank down and lay still.

RUTH found herself gazing up at a very tall man, clad in the dusty weathered

[Continued on page 114]

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STAIRS OF SAND

[Continued from page 113]

ragged garb of a desert wanderer. His face, dark almost as an Indian's, and strange with its deep sloping lines of sadness, she knew, yet did not know. Gray eyes, clear, piercing as those of an eagle, looked down upon her with a soft and wonderful light of joy. Ruth trembled. Who was this man? It was not only that she had seen him before, but she remembered that softness of light in his eyes.

"I know you—yet I don't," she said, tremulously.

"Surely you remember me?" he asked gently.

"Yes—no-o," answered Ruth, gravely shaking her head.

"Have you forgotten Genie?"

"Genie? Genie who?" she asked wonderingly, with quickening currents of thought, whirling, coalescing toward revelation.

"Why, Genie Linwood."

"Oh!—Genie Linwood!,"

Santa Ysabel!

Ruth flashed. "Yes—yes. Oh, I remember Genie. It was to her I gave my pretty gowns when I left Santa Ysabel. She was to marry Genie, the young rancher . . . Gene Blair, who fell in love with her—who thought her a poor desert wail when she was rich."

"Yes, Ruth—that was Genie," replied the man, in a tone not untinged by sadness.

"Now I remember you," cried Ruth. "You were Genie's friend—her desert man. Eagle, she called you. Oh, I remember now . . . you had found her on the desert where she was starving with her mother. She was only a child. Then her mother died, and you took care of her for years—until she grew up. You brought her out of the desert—to civilization—to the ranch of the Blair's. You wanted to find a home for her. They took her in, loved her, believing her poor, and all the time she had riches. The gold her father had mined and which you had saved all those years. It was like a fairy story."

Ruth, warming with speech, was shaken with a disturbing and troubled memory not yet clear.

Adam strode to the prostrate form of Stone and gazed down upon him. He regarded Ruth with eyes she found hard to meet. "Who is this fellow and what is he to you?"

"His name is Stone. He's nothing to me," replied Ruth, shortly.

"I don't often mistake the actions of men," said Adam, thoughtfully. "Where do you live? Where were you going? What happened?"

"I'll tell you, presently," rejoined Ruth. "It all comes back to me . . . You left us at Santa Ysabel. You disappeared one night. We waited day after day. You didn't come back. Genie postponed her marriage. At last she said: 'He's gone for good. I was afraid of it. Gone back to the desert! Just like Dismukes!' I recall her very words. She was heartbroken. . . . She called you Eagle, but the others gave you a name . . . Was it Wansfell?"

"Yes," replied Adam. "Desert men called me Wansfell. But that is not my real name. It was given me by a drunken prospector, many years ago. And somehow it stuck to me."

"Wansfell? I've heard that name more than once since Grandpa and I left Santa Ysabel," mused Ruth. "But I hated the past almost as I hated the present. I cherished no memories. They hurt me so."

"Ruth, now that I've found you, tell me your story," he said, with a tone she found it difficult to resist.

"Found me! What do—you mean?" she queried, catching her breath.

"Ruth, it was you I ran away from, at Santa Ysabel four long years ago," he answered, with deep feeling. "Not from Genie and her happiness. Not to wander back into the lonely desert. I left you in the night, without a word, because if I had stayed an hour longer my strength would have failed. I loved you so terribly that it would have betrayed me. You were only nineteen, lonely, unhappy,

yearning for love. So I left you."

He took her hand and held it in his. "I had my ordeal, Ruth. I wandered from place to place, fighting myself. Every cloud, every stone had the contour of your face. But at last I gave you up. And then I took the trail back to the scene of my crime. I meant to give myself up and suffer my punishment. The law wanted me so I went back to Picacho. It had been a wild rushing miners' camp, but I found it abandoned. But Merryvale was there. It was hard to make him recognize in me the boy he had known there fourteen years before. I told him I had come to accept the penalty for killing my brother. Then Merryvale explained that I had rushed off into the desert without knowing the truth. I had not killed the brother I had loved.

He was alive. I was not a murderer. . . . I had become a fugitive—I had endured all the agony the desert could deal to a man—for nothing."

"I rushed back to Santa Ysabel to tell you I was free," he went on, "only to find you gone. I did not think of seeing Genie. I thought only of you . . . Then began my search. But you were like a grain of sand lost out here. I never knew the name of your grandfather. And not until a few days ago did I ever meet a man who I believed had seen you. He was a prospector I chanced to run across in Yuma. He believed

he had seen you at a waterhole we used to call Indian Well, which is now Lost Lake . . . So I came—and I have found you, after long wandering . . ."

Ruth covered her face with her hands. "I'm not what I was when you knew me," she whispered.

He kept silent so long that Ruth feared his next words.

"I did not expect you to be. Anything might have happened to you. I remember the tragedy of your mother."

"Oh—that is what I've been trying to remember," she cried out. "You knew my mother. You spoke of her. But you told me so little. Tell me now, I beg of you."

"All in good time, Ruth," he returned. "But not quite yet . . . I felt that if I ever found you it would be reward enough. The least I expected was to tell you my story, your mother's, and then to serve you, as I tried to serve her."

Ruth felt the hot blood burn her cheeks.

"The years have changed me for the worse," she explained. "You called me a dreaming petulant girl. I was. I am twenty-three now. All the four years since I met you I've lived on this desert. I am all changed, stormy—burning for I know not what. Sometimes I see myself as a woman trying to climb these stairs of sand. The dreams and hopes of my girlhood are gone. Yet I cannot grow indifferent to everything—and sink to the level of an Indian woman."

"That is because you have clung to an ideal."

"I have no ideal—and you've found me too late," replied Ruth, bitterly.

"Nay, it could not be too late while you live."

A movement on the part of her companion caused Ruth to turn. Stone was struggling to a sitting posture. His swollen and bloody face was almost unrecognizable. Wansfell strode over to confront him.

"Get up," he ordered. "Take a canteen and some grub, and light out."

Stone lost no time in complying, and soon he was on his way toward the gateway of the canyon.

"Ruth, you really eloped with that boy?" inquired Wansfell, thoughtfully.

"Yes. I was a fool. But I'd have gone with anyone," she returned, impatiently.

In the look he bent on her there was no blame, merely an immutable loyalty. Ruth's quick intuition grasped that nothing could make any difference to this man. It did not matter to him what she was. He had found her. Something vague and vast began to form around her, loom over her, baffling and disconcerting.

[Continued on page 115]

STAIRS OF SAND

[Continued from page 114]

Meanwhile Adam was getting food and drink, which he presently set before Ruth. They ate in silence.

"You must be tired after your long ride," he said. "Will you walk a while?"

"Yes, I'd like to after we've talked," she began, hurriedly. "There is so much.... But first, now that you've found me what do you think you're going to do with me?"

"It depends," he replied, slowly. "Ruth, I had only one hope—to find you and to help you. There is a bond between you and me, which you don't realize."

"Oh, Adam, tell me!" she entreated. "It is not yet time," he replied, enigmatically. "First let me help you to get over your distress. Meeting me has upset you. You are bound in some way that you hate to confess. Is it not so?"

"Yes, indeed I am," she murmured. "Well then, know once for all that I love you and that my greatest wish is to serve you. I cannot hope that you might marry me—"

"Adam, I—I can't marry you," she said brokenly. "I would gladly. But it's too late!"

"You are already married?" he went on, a little huskily.

"Yes. But it's not only that. Any day I might be free of him. Life is uncertain on this desert. He is hated and feared. Some day he will be killed.... But I meant, too late for another and more serious reason. I fear I have become a hopeless, miserable, half-mad woman, with no longer a belief in self or God. The desert has ruined me. I would never drag down and ruin a man whom my mother knew and trusted."

"Ruth, tell me your story and let me judge of the hard facts. Trust me."

Ruth drew a deep breath that was half sigh, half sob, and surrendered to some emotion beyond her ken.

"I'll begin where you left me—at Santa Ysabel," she said. "My grandfather, Caleb Hunt, had considerable money which he wanted to invest in desert holdings. Also he was affected with a pulmonary disease, from which he suffered less on the desert than anywhere. We went first to Yuma, where he fell in with the men who figure largely in my story. Grandfather went into the freighting business with these men and established a freighting port at Lost Lake."

"The man who won my grandfather to this enterprise was a young handsome fellow who fascinated me. But I did not love him. He kept at me to marry him, and grandfather favored his suit. Between them they made my life wretched. At last grandfather told me that if I did not consent to this marriage he would be ruined. I did not know which way to turn. My suitor swore that if I would only marry him he would wait for love to come—before asking me to be really a wife. They finally wore me out."

"The very first night after my marriage my husband, under the influence of drink, tried to force his way into my bedroom. At my refusal to let him in he grew violent and nearly wrecked the place. But I escaped to grandfather's house."

"Next day he approached me, sober, and begged me to overlook his action. I told him I loathed him, and that was the end. He tried for weeks to change me, and failing, he stood out in his true colors. He was a gambler, a dissolute adventurer who gradually gained power in Yuma. He robbed grandfather."

"All this would have been bad enough for me, without the terrible devastating maddening effect of the desert. I grew obsessed with the idea of getting away. I looked always for some one to free me.... A few weeks ago this young man I was with, Hal Stone, came to Lost Lake. He was kind, pleasant, engaging at first, and he loved me. I persuaded myself that I was attracted to him, and might some day love him. He had little trouble in getting me to run away. We left Lost Lake at daylight this morning, and not until late did I suspect Stone was off the road. You might—never have—met us.... I see no way out—I can't go back home, yet—somehow—I thank God—you found me."

"It could have been vastly worse," added Wansfell, in a voice full of relief. "Have you told us everything?"

[Continued on page 116]

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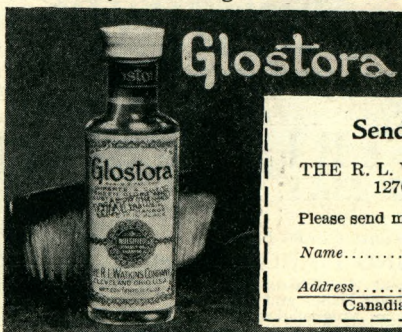
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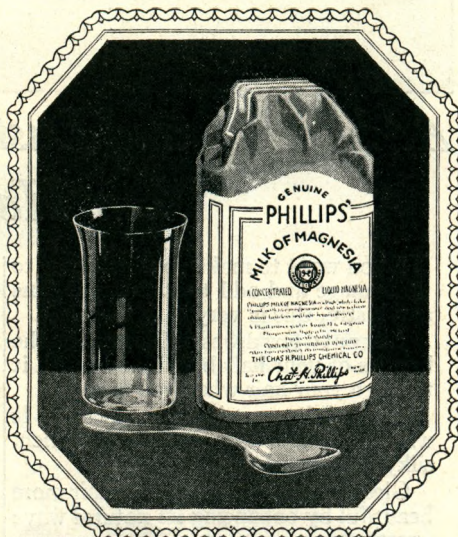
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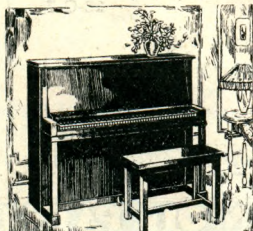
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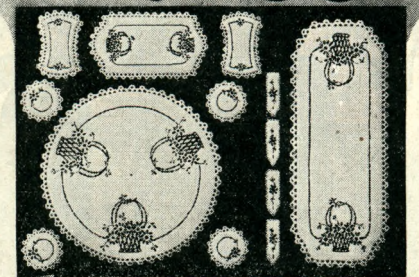
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STAIRS OF SAND

[Continued from page 115]

"Yes, everything vital. I held back his name because I hate to speak it."

"There is no need. It doesn't matter who your—the man is. What does matter is the need for you to learn a lesson from the past. Only in rare cases does a man or woman grow spiritually on the desert. Desert creatures, particularly human beings, concentrate on survival. A fight for life! . . . Ruth, you have neglected your spiritual side. You are not broken—lost. And now you will not be."

"Not broken—lost!" repeated Ruth. "And now I never will be . . . Why?" "Because I have found you," he said, simply. "Go to bed and rest. Tomorrow we will decide what to do."

He moved away into the gloom. Ruth roused herself, and groping for the blankets sat down to remove her shoes and outer garments. Slipping down between the blankets she covered herself and lay still. It was a hard bed, yet, such was her fatigue, something to be grateful for. She would rest and think, but not sleep.

She thought about her grandfather. What would become of him now? Guerd Larey and Collishaw, with their hirelings, would devour him as wolves a sheep. She had been the power that had held these hardened men leashed. Poor old man! The desert would claim him, as it had claimed her mother and father. But never would it destroy her!

She would not return to Lost Lake. The decision sent a tingling all over her body. What sweetness there would be in verdant green surroundings, by the cool seaside, in the vineyards and groves of the coast!

Suddenly a footstep on the sand broke her brooding meditations. She had closed her eyes, and forgotten for the moment the night, the canyon, and the men who were there.

A tall dark form moved in the moonlight. Wansfell! He walked by her, down the middle of the canyon a few rods, his hands folded behind him. He passed scarcely a dozen yards from Ruth, and in the moonlight she could see him distinctly patrolling this beat.

He walked erect, with free step, though he gave an impression of a man burdened. What was on his mind that he did not rest and sleep? Ruth knew, and she could not control womanly emotions. A sense of protection suddenly struck her. Never a night had she lain down in her desert home without dread! But this night no man, not even Guerd Larey, could harm her, while that giant stalked out there.

Ruth's heart swelled high in her breast. To think that this strange man had fallen in love with her at Genie's—four years past—had fled from her, believed he had murdered his brother . . . and now he had found her. What did it mean? What could it lead to?

She felt that she must flee from him before he found her to be ever a shallower creature than she had confessed herself. She had been ready to fall in love with him four years ago. She wanted to now. But not Genie's Eagle! She must not love him, for he soared to the heights. Finally surrendering to a drowsiness that dulled her thought, she fell asleep.

A VOICE pierced Ruth's slumbers. She awoke in a rosy cool dawn. The sun had not risen. Rising, she dressed, and found water in one of Stone's canteens, which he had left in the wagon.

"I won't go back to Lost Lake," she announced aloud, as if to fortify herself.

Adam arrived with an armful of brush and dead cactus, which he dropped upon the sand.

"So you're not going home?" he queried, with a grave quick glance at her.

"Adam, you don't approve?"

"I'm afraid not. Well, let's have breakfast. Then I'll tackle the job."

"You mean changing Old Butch and me? Two mules with but a single

thought! Perhaps that is what you meant!"

He laughed, the first time she had heard him do so. It was a welcome sound, ringing pleasantly upon the ear. Then while he fell to helping Merryvale she watched him with studious, critical eyes. Suddenly she experienced a baffling sensation that was familiar. Stone had awakened this in her in some degree, other men in the past had roused it, fleetingly. It never lasted. Here it came again, stronger than ever before, somehow changed—sweet and thrilling, until she deliberately beat it down.

It was Merryvale who did all the talking during breakfast. He appeared to be a loquacious old man, as spry of wit and humor as he was on his feet. His attachment for Adam showed markedly.

After breakfast Adam drew her back to a seat on the flat rock. "Well, then, what is it?"

"I want to go out of this desert," announced Ruth.

"Where to?"

"To the coast. Or anywhere, for that matter, away from the sand and heat."

"What would you do?"

"Find work somewhere."

"Could you do any kind of work that would make you self-supporting?"

"I don't know. I never could keep house for Grandpa, that's certain. But I'd have to work at something. I've some money to start with."

"Ruth, this plan won't do," said Adam, gravely. "Let me reason with you."

"I'm afraid I'm not one to listen to reason. I never was."

"Isn't it selfish of you to leave your grandfather?"

"Yes, of course it is," she replied, in impatient regret. "But I can't help that."

"You could make this a turning point in your life. To go back to him, to your obligations, to overcome your loathing of the desert, to endure and to serve—that would make you a real woman. If you run off alone, footloose and reckless and beautiful as you are, it will be only to ruin."

"Mr. Wansfell, are you suggesting that I go back to my husband?" she queried, with sarcasm.

"No. If he is truly what you say, it's right that you never go. But your grandfather—what you owe him, and more, what you owe yourself . . ."

"I owe myself freedom from this desert."

"Do you deny the risk you run, if you persist in going?"

"Risk—of what?"

"Of hardship, of trouble—of ruin?"

"Deny risk of all that?" she flashed. "No, I don't. But the same thing holds if I remain and at least I have a chance. Here I'm absolutely sure of ruin, sooner or later . . . or death!"

"If I let you go, I shall go too," he said.

"Of course," replied Ruth, eagerly. "How else could I? I expect and hope you will take me out and set me upon my feet somewhere."

"And then?"

"Why, why, you could leave me to—to my fate."

"No. What of my promise to your mother?" he returned, sternly.

"My—mother?" echoed Ruth, falteringly. "I—I didn't know you—"

"You shall know, presently. But know now that I wouldn't leave you, whether you go or stay . . . Ruth, look me straight in the eyes. There . . . you have no call for fury. Tell me, have you always been truthful?"

"No, I suppose I lied to Stone—and the rest," she burst out. "But I told you the truth."

"I believe you, and that helps," he said. "But to get back to the main issue . . . I don't think it womanly or right for you to abandon your grandfather."

"Right or wrong, I must," she rejoined.

"His home is your home, isn't it?"

"Yes."

[Continued on page 119]



STAIRS OF SAND

[Continued from page 116]

"Well, I'm sorry to oppose you, but I'll have to take you back," he replied, conclusively.

Ruth felt the blood rush hot to her cheeks.

"You shall not!" she retorted, passionately. "Unless you resort to force, as Stone did."

"Ruth, I want to spare you pain," he said, bending over her. "At least until you're home, recovered from this mad jaunt. Will you take my word, until some later time, that I have the power now to make you change your mind?"

"No, I won't."

"You will not trust me?"

"I can't. I don't believe . . . There's not any one who can change me."

"You refuse to go home?"

"Absolutely."

He turned his back and appeared to be fumbling at his blouse. Then he wheeled, strangely pale, and forced something into her hand. "Look inside," he said. The object was an oval locket of dull gold worn smooth. Ruth opened it and it disclosed two faces done in miniature.

"Mother . . . and I!" she gasped.

Her mother's lovely face smiled up at her. And opposite was the youthful portrait of herself. She had been fourteen when this was painted in Philadelphia—oh, so long ago! Her look returned to the beloved features of this mother she had lost, and her hot tears fell upon the open locket.

"Adam, where did you get this?" she whispered.

"Your mother gave it to me," he replied.

"When?"

"This is May . . . it will be eight years ago in July . . . Listen . . ."

He dropped down beside her, so that his eyes were on a level with hers.

"Years ago an old prospector friend of mine, Dismukes by name, told me about a man and woman living in Death Valley under strange circumstances. They were gentle folk, he said, not inured to the hardship of desert life, and death surely awaited them there. I found them living in a comfortless shack in that valley of destruction. The woman was exceedingly beautiful and frail—your mother, Magdalene Virey. I saw at once that I was not wanted there, but I decided to stay to try and help your mother. Virey was beyond me. He was half mad, I think. Anyway he had brought her there to the loneliest and most forbidding spot on earth, away from the world of men. He loved her so madly that his terrible jealousy had brought this about. Your mother had never loved Virey but she had come willingly to Death Valley, to suffer any privation that he chose to inflict. She had a great spirit. But she was a worldly woman, with a mocking doubt of man and herself and God.

I could not persuade your mother to leave Death Valley. She vowed she would perish there as Virey wished. She had a wonderful mind, and I interested her in Death Valley. Gradually she improved in health and strength. She came to love the grandeur and sublimity of that appalling place.

"All that I had suffered I told your mother. In the end it saved her soul. When July came, one morning, after a night when for hours I believed your mother was dying, she took this locket and gave it to me, with a sacred trust.

"The day came when I could endure her agony no longer. I decided to kill Virey, or leave him there to a worse fate, and take your mother away. I went in search of my burros when I heard the crackling of rocks. There was Virey high on the slope rolling rocks down. I had to dodge great boulders as I ran to get your mother from the shack. Your mother came running out. Virey ran down to her. But it was too late to save her. I climbed a high rock, just in the nick of time. The gray mass of stones and dust, like a cloud, enveloped your mother and Virey—and carried them away—buried them forever."

Ruth sank against Adam's shoulder,

with bursting heart and blinded eyes. "Adam, you must—have loved mother," murmured Ruth brokenly.

"Not at first, but in the end I did love her," returned Adam, hoarsely.

"And my mother's sacred trust?" asked Ruth, with trembling lips.

"Was you, Ruth. She bade me seek you, find you, and save you from a fate such as hers had been. She said by her own love for me you would love me too. You would be like her. You would have all of her weaknesses and none of her strength. The same wild longings and passions without the desire to thwart them!"

"Oh, how true!" cried Ruth, bitterly.

"That was your mother's sacred trust. She gave me you."

Ruth drew away from him and rose. "I yield to my mother's trust, knowing that I am more lost than ever," she replied, unsteadily. "Take me where you will."

MERRYVALE had everything packed. The team was hitched up and ready.

"Come, Ruth," called Adam. Without protest she permitted Adam to help her up to the wagon-seat.

"Merryvale, you drive. I'll go ahead," he directed and stalked on ahead, driving the two burros.

Ruth shut the merciless desert out of her consciousness and locked herself with her grief and with bowed head and face hidden in her veil she grieved for her mother.

She endured this black hour, sustained by the one unforgettable fact of her mother's love, and prayer that she be not victim to the heritage of blood bequeathed her.

When again she grew aware of the outside world, she was across the sands towards southern California. Ahead three dark figures moved against the wavering heat veils—Wansell and his burros. Ruth watched the dark figure, markedly tall even at long distance. This desert man had again come into her life, and the promise of agony which had haunted her at Santa Ysabel seemed sure of its fruition.

"Tell me about him," she suddenly said to Merryvale.

"Was it at Picacho he thought he'd killed his brother?" went on Ruth.

"Yep, right there at Picacho," returned the old man as he flicked the reins over the laboring mules.

"Why, I wonder? What was the trouble?"

"Wal, he told you why he ran away from you at Santa Ysabel. But he didn't tell you the months of torture out heah, fightin' to give you up, an' then fightin' to surrender to the law. I was in Picacho when he came to sacrifice himself. I was the one to tell him about his awful mistake—that he hadn't killed his brother at all. An' it's since then that I've learned Adam's life when a boy—how he loved his brother who from childhood up robbed him of everything . . . By George, that's the dastard part of it, an' why I was always sorry he didn't kill his brother!"

"Merryvale! What a harsh and cruel thing to say!" exclaimed Ruth, aghast.

"No matter. Adam was a gentle kindly boy, favorite of his mother. He loved his brother as I never knew any brother to be loved. An' in turn he was hated.

"After the mother died they went west where there was some dispute over a Mexican girl that Adam was protectin'. The brother insulted their mother's name. They quarrelled fiercely in the town of Ehrenberg an' then came the bitter fight at Picacho . . . Adam thought he had killed the brother, an' he fled to the desert."

ADAM halted his burros just short of the post and waited for Merryvale.

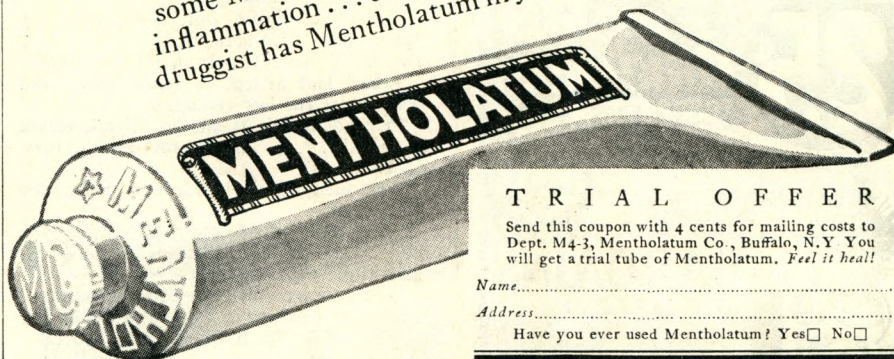
"My home is there," announced Ruth, pointing to an earth-colored adobe structure visible through the trees, above the spring.

[Continued on page 120]

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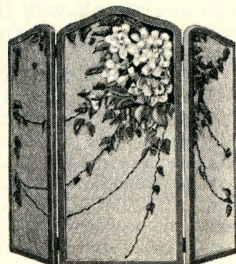
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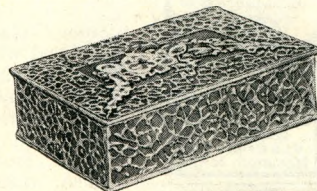
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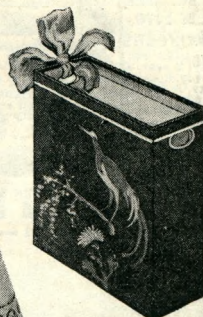
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STAIRS OF SAND

[Continued from page 119]

Adam followed Ruth carrying her bags. Once inside the hedge Ruth slackened her pace. There was no sound except a tinkle of running water. The adobe house was long and low, with a porch running its length.

"Here—we are—Adam," announced Ruth, breathlessly. "Look what you've brought me back—to—for all my life."

Adam's keen eyes surveyed the scene. "I'm afraid you don't see truly," he replied, with a smile. "This is an oasis. And I would never tire of the view."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Ruth, impatient with him. "I don't see Grandfather . . ."

"Let me go find him," replied Adam.

"Yes. And I'll go with you," said Ruth.

But they had scarcely started when Ruth caught sight of the old man entering the hedge gate.

"Wait, Adam. Here he comes."

Upon nearing the porch her grandfather looked up to disclose a worn troubled face, which instantly lightened with amaze and gladness. He hurried forward—a slight man, gray of hair, and rather stoop-shouldered.

"Ruth!" he burst out, quaveringly. "Where in the world have you been all this time?"

Adam had arisen, to stand with head bent under the low ceiling.

"Grandad, this is an old friend, Adam Wansfell . . . Adam, my grandfather, Caleb Hunt."

The men shook hands and exchanged greetings.

"Grandad, what did Hal Stone tell you?" interposed Ruth, eager to have explanations over.

"Ruth, I haven't seen Stone," returned Hunt, in surprise. "Some one saw him just a little while ago, limping by the post."

"I ran off with Stone yesterday," went on Ruth, hurriedly.

"Good heavens! You ran off with Hal Stone?" ejaculated her grandfather. "Your husband will shoot him!"

"Not when I explain. It was all my fault, Grandad—Well, we got within ten miles of the mountains, when the gray mule, Old Butch, balked. We could not go on. Stone said we must camp there. Then, when I repulsed his advances, he got ugly. Adam happened along with Merryvale, and rescued me. He sent Stone away last night. We made camp there and this morning started back."

"Sir, I thank you indeed," said Hunt, courteously and warmly to Adam. "Perhaps, this will be a lesson to my granddaughter."

"Grandad, I'll never run off again," murmured Ruth, mournfully.

"Well! Something has come over my lass," declared Hunt, affectionately placing an arm around Ruth. "It is very welcome, but rather perplexing. How did you bring about this change?"

"Grandad—listen," interposed Ruth, tremulously. "Adam had no trouble changing me . . . He knew Mother. He was with her—and Father—the last weeks of their lives . . . In Death Valley!"

"What—what is this? Ruth!" . . . he burst out, in great emotion. "Wansfell, did you know my daughter Magdalene?"

"Yes, Mr. Hunt, I knew her," replied Adam, sombrely.

"This is most extraordinary. After all these years! Thank God, we have come to know at last . . . Did Magdalene give you any message for us?"

"The locket, Adam. Let him see that," said Ruth, eagerly.

Adam's big brown hand slipped inside his worn blouse and appeared to jerk to a stop. "Who is that man?" he whispered in a low tense voice his eyes fixed upon the path.

Ruth's swift glance, following their direction, saw a man striding up the walk. She laughed outright. "That is my husband," she said and rose, conscious of a sudden tingling heat along her veins.

She saw Adam rise and step quickly into the open door. Her grandfather likewise stepped into the room.

Ruth had awaited Guerd Larey's ap-

proach many a time with mingled emotions, but never with the poise and certainty of this moment. Fear had left her. The sunset light glinted on his thick fair hair and his handsome dissolute face.

"Ruth!" he exclaimed, and strode to the edge of the porch where she stood, bending to search her face with his great hungry eyes. Joy, relief, suspicion, anger all strove there. "Where have you been?" he demanded in a peremptory tone.

"None of your business," she returned, coldly. "Guerd, don't speak to me in that tone. You have nothing whatever to do with my actions, nor can you bully me."

"But I've been frightened. I can't help but love you," he replied harshly.

"That's your misfortune, if it's true," said Ruth.

"You'll never believe that you could have changed my life?" he queried, with bitter passion.

"Never. You are a slave to your selfish desires," she returned scornfully. "You were a gambler and a cheat even when you married me."

"Ruth, I swear I'll mend my ways—if you'll only love me," he implored, with a pathos that was almost savage.

"It's impossible, Guerd," she replied, wondering why she could not feel pity for him. "And if that's what you came to say, please—"

"That only came out when I saw you," he flashed. Then the eloquence and dark radiance of him faded. "This young Stone is bragging around he eloped with you. I want to hear what you've got to say before I—"

"Guerd, don't kill Stone," interrupted Ruth, in distress. "Don't even strike him. It was all my fault. I ran off with him. I encouraged him—let him make love to me . . . Oh, there's no excuse for me, Guerd. It seemed I couldn't stand this place any longer. I just had to get out."

White to the lips, he retorted. "You'd go with anyone—even a Mexican—rather than with me . . . Well, what happened? Stone's face is smashed. He said Old Butch kicked him. That's a lie. Some man's fists did it. Who was he—and what for?"

Ruth divined the imminence of peril for the boy she had led to such extremes.

"Guerd, we couldn't reach the Indian settlement," she began, impulsively. "Old Butch barked. There was nothing to do but camp. Stone wanted to make love to me. I wouldn't let him. He grew violent then, and during a struggle between us, two men came up—and ended it."

"Who struck Stone?"

"Adam Wansfell, an old friend whom I knew four years ago at Santa Ysabel."

"Wansfell! I know that name. He's a desert tramp. Wanders around doing all kinds of queer tricks. And you knew him in Santa Ysabel? . . ."

"He brought me back home. You may learn for yourself who and what he is."

"You let Stone kiss you?" queried, Larey darkly.

She averted her face from the jealous blaze of his eyes.

"And you never let me kiss you!" he rasped.

Ruth had no reply to that poignant accusation. He wheeled away and stalked down the path through the hedge gate.

Suddenly Ruth remembered Adam and called him. Receiving no response she went hurriedly into the room. On first glance she did not locate Adam. Then she heard a long shuddering breath. Adam lay on her grandfather's couch, his face buried, his hands clutching the pillows, the wide shoulders strained as if in convulsion. With contracting heart Ruth ran to the couch.

"Why—why—Adam!" she called, and put a faltering hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, what could make you this way? It was only my husband. You must have heard . . ."

"Ruth," he said brokenly. "He is my brother. My name is not Wansfell. I am Adam Larey."

[Continued in APRIL McCALL'S]

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minated Supervisals. However the thing had been taken betimes, and in a few months he would worry no more about it.

"But suppose he dies?" I suggested to Manallace.

"He won't. I've been talking to Gleeag. He says he's all right."

"Wouldn't Gleeag's talk be common form?"

"I wish you hadn't said that. But, surely, Gleeag wouldn't have the face to play with me—or her."

"Why not? I expect it's been done before."

But Manallace, insisted that in this case, it would be impossible.

The operation was a success and, some weeks later, Costerley began to recast the arrangement and most of the material of his book. "Let me have my way," he said, when Manallace protested. "They are making too much of a baby of me. I really don't need Gleeag looking in every day now." But Lady Costerley told us that he required careful watching. His heart had felt the strain; and fret or disappointment of any kind must be avoided—"Even," she turned to Manallace, "though you know ever so much better how his book should be arranged than he does himself."

"But really," Manallace began. "I'm very careful not to fuss—"

She shook her finger at him playfully. "You don't think you do; but remember, he tells me everything that you tell him, just the same as he told me everything that he used to tell you. Oh, I don't mean the things that men talk about. I mean about his Chaucer."

"I didn't realize that," said Manallace weakly.

"I thought you didn't. He never spares me anything; but I don't mind," she replied with a laugh, and went off to Gleeag, who was paying his daily visit. Gleeag said he had no objection to Manallace working with Costerley on the book for a given time—say, thrice a week—but supported Lady Costerley's demand that he should not be over-taxed in what she called "the sacred hours." The man grew more and more difficult to work with, and what check he had heretofore set on his self-praises went altogether.

"He says there has never been anything in the history of Letters to compare with it," Manallace groaned. "He wants now to inscribe—he never dedicates, you know—inscribe it to me, as his 'most valued assistant.' The devil of it is that she backs him up in getting it out soon. Why? How much do you think she knows?"

"Why should she know anything at all?"

"You heard her say he had told her everything that he had told me about Chaucer? (I wish she hadn't said that!) If she puts two and two together, she can't help seeing that everyone of his notions and theories has been played up to. But then—but then . . . Why is she trying to hurry publication? She talks about me fretting him. She's at him, all the time, to be quick."

Costerley must have overworked for, after a couple of months, he complained of a stitch in his right side, which Gleeag said was a slight adhesion, an almost inevitable result of the operation. It threw him back awhile, but he returned to his work undefeated.

THE book was due in the Autumn, Summer was passing, and his publisher urgent, and—he said to me, when after a longish interval I called—Manallace had chosen this time, of all, to take his holiday. He was not pleased with Manallace, once an indefatigable aide, but now dilatory, and full of time-wasting objections. Lady Costerley had noticed it, too.

Meantime, with Lady Costerley's help, he himself was doing the best he could to expedite the book; but Manallace had mislaid (did I think through jealousy?) some essential stuff which had been dictated to him. And Lady Costerley wrote Manallace, who had been delayed by a slight motor-accident abroad, that the fret of waiting was prejudicial to her husband's health. Manallace, on his return from the continent, showed me that letter.

"He has fretted a little, I believe," I said.

Manallace shuddered. "If I stay abroad, I'm helping to kill him. If I help him to hurry up the book, I'm expected to kill him. She knows," he said.

"You're mad. You've got this thing on the brain."

"I have not. Look here! You remember that Gleeag gave me from four to six, three times a week to work with him. She called them the 'sacred hours.' You heard her? Well, they are! They are Gleeag's and hers. But she's so infernally plain, and I'm such a fool, it took me weeks to find it out."

"That's their affair," I answered. "It doesn't prove she knows anything about the Chaucer."

"She does. He told her everything he had told me when I was pumping him, all those years. She put two and two together when the thing came out. She saw exactly how I had set my traps. I know it! She's been trying to make me admit it."

"What did you do?"

"Didn't understand what she was driv-

DAYSRING MISHANDLED

[Continued from page 153]

ing at, of course. And then she asked Gleeag, before me, if he didn't think the delay over the book was fretting Alured. He didn't think so. He said getting it out might deprive him of an interest. He had *that* much decency. *She's* the devil!"

"What do you suppose is her game, then?"

"If Costerley knows he's been had, it'll kill him. She's at me all the time, indirectly, to let it out. I've told you, she wants to make it a joke between us. Gleeag's willing to wait. He knows Costerley's a dead man. It slips out when they talk. They say, 'He was,' not 'He is.' Both of 'em know it. But she wants him finished sooner."

"I don't believe it. What are you going to do?"

"What can I? I'm going to have him killed, though."

Manlike, he invented compromises whereby Costerley might be lured up by-paths of interest, to delay publication. This was not a success. As Autumn advanced Costerley fretted more, and suffered from return of his distressing colics. At last, Gleeag told him that he thought they might be due to an overlooked gall-stone working down. A second comparatively trivial operation would eliminate this bother once and for all. If Costerley cared for another opinion, Gleeag named a surgeon of eminence, "And then," said he cheerily, "the two of us can talk you over." Costerley did not want to be talked over. He was oppressed by pains in his right side, which, at first, had yielded to the liver tonics Gleeag prescribed; but now they stayed—like a toothache—behind everything. He felt most at ease in his bedroom study, with his proofs around him. If he had more pain than he could stand, he would consider the second operation. Meantime Manallace—"the meticulous Manallace," he called him—agreed with him in thinking that the Mentzel page facsimile, done by the Sunnopia Library, was not quite good enough for the great book, and the Sunnopia people were, very decently, having it re-processed. This would hold things back till early Spring, which had its advantages, for he could run a fresh eye over all in the interval.

One gathered these news in the course of stray visits as the days shortened. He insisted on Manallace keeping to the "sacred hours," and Manallace insisted on my accompanying him when possible. On these occasions he and Costerley would confer apart for half an hour or so, while I listened to an unendurable clock in the drawing room. Then I would join them and help wear out the rest of the time, while Costerley rambled. His speech, now, was often clouded and uncertain—the result of the "liver-tonics"; and his face came to look like old vellum.

IT was a few days after Christmas—the operation was proposed for the following Friday—that we called together. She met us with word that Alured had picked up an irritating little Winter cough, due to a cold wave, but we were not, therefore, to abridge our visit. We found him in steam perfumed with Friar's Balsam. He waved the old Sunnopia facsimile at us. We agreed that it ought to have been more worthy. He took a dose of his cough mixture, lay back and asked us to lock the door. There was, he whispered, something wrong somewhere. He could not lay his finger on it, but it was in the air. He felt he was being played with. He did not like it. There was something wrong all round him. Had we noticed it? Manallace and I severally and slowly denied that we had noticed anything of the sort.

With no longer break than a light fit of coughing, he fell into the hideous helpless panic of the sick—those worse than captives who lie at the judgment and mercy of the hale for every office and hope. He wanted to go away. Would we help him to pack his Gladstone? Or, if that would attract too much attention in certain quarters, help him to dress and go out. There was an urgent matter to be set right; and now that he had The Title and knew his own mind it would all end happily and he would be well again. *Please* would we let him go out, just to speak to—he named her—he named her by her "little" name out of the old days? Manallace quite agreed, and recommended a pull at the "liver-tonic" to brace him after so long in the house. He took it, and Manallace suggested that it would be better if, after his walk, he came down to the cottage for a week-end and brought the revise with him. They could then retouch the last chapter. He answered to that drug and to the drug of his work, and presently simpered drowsily. Yes, it was good—though he said it, who should not? He praised himself awhile till, with a puzzled forehead and shut eyes, he told us that *she* had been saying lately that it was too good—the whole thing, if we understood, was *too* good. He wished us to get the exact shade of her meaning. She had suggested, or rather implied this doubt. She had said—he would let us draw our own inferences—that the Chaucer find had "anticipated the wants of humanity." Johnson, of course. No need to tell him that. But what the Hell was her implication? Oh God! Life had always been one long inuendo! And she had said that a man could do anything with anyone if he saved him the trouble of thinking. What did she mean by that? He had never shirked thought. He had thought sustainedly all his life. It *wasn't* too good, was it? Manallace didn't think it was too good—did he? But this pick-pick-picking at a man's brain and work was too bad, wasn't it? What did she mean? Why did she always bring in Manallace

who was only a friend—no scholar but a lover of the game—Eh?—Manallace could confirm this if he were here, instead of loafing on the Continent just when he was needed.

"I've come back," Manallace interrupted unsteadily. "I can confirm every word you've said. You've nothing to worry about. It's *your* find—*your* credit—*your* glory and—all the rest of it."

"Swear you'll tell her so then," said Costerley. "She doesn't believe a word I say. She told me she never has. Promise!" Manallace promised, and Costerley added that he had named him his literary executor, the proceeds of the book to go to his wife. "All profits without deduction," he gasped. "Big sales if it's properly handled. *You* don't need money, Graydon'll trust you to any extent. It 'ud be a long . . ."

He coughed and as he caught his breath, his pain broke through all the drugs, and his outcry filled the room. Manallace rose to fetch Gleeag, when a full, high, affected voice, unheard for a generation, accompanied, as it seemed, the clamor of the beast in agony, saying:—"I wish to God some one would stop that old swine howling down there. I can't. I was going to tell you fellows that it would be a dam' long time before Graydon advanced me two quid."

We escaped together, and found Gleeag with Lady Costerley, on the landing.

"You knew all along, I suppose. What was it, really?" I asked Gleeag.

"Malignant kidney-trouble—generalized at the end. No use worrying him about it. We let him through as easily as possible. Yes. A happy release . . . What? . . . Oh! Golder's Green, Friday, at eleven."

There, then, Manallace and I met. He told me that she had asked him whether the book need now be published; and he had told her this was more than ever necessary, in her interests as well as Costerley's.

"She is going to be known as his widow—for a while, at any rate. Did I perjure myself with him?"

"Not explicitly," I answered.

"Well, I have now—with her explicitly," said he, and took out the black gloves. . . .

As, on the appointed words, the coffin crawled sideways through the noiselessly-closing door-flaps, I saw Lady Costerley's eyes turn towards Gleeag.

CONTENTS

MARCH 1928

COVER DESIGN, PAINTED FOR McCALL'S BY NEYSA MCMEIN

FICTION

STAIRS OF SAND I	13
ZANE GREY	
THE GREAT PEACOCK	15
ELIZABETH JORDAN	
THE PEARL DOWRY	17
FRANK E. VERNEY	
DAYSRING MISHANDLED	20
RUDYARD KIPLING	
HEART'S THIEF	22
ACHMED ABDULLAH	
THE LITTLE YELLOW HOUSE II	24
BEATRICE BURTON MORGAN	
THE PLAINS OF ABRAHAM VI	32
JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD	

ARTICLES

THE CURTAIN WILL RISE AT 8:30, SHARP	4
DOROTHY PARKER	
THE VENUS DE MILO HAS MOVED	7
HARRISON FISHER	
YOUR HANDWRITING MEANS YOU	8
HELEN CHRISTINE BENNETT	
MARRIAGE—A TRIAL?—A FAILURE?—A CONQUEST!	18
PROF. HERBERT SPENCER JENNINGS	
MARY ROBERTS RINEHART	
LIFE AND LETTERS OF GENE STRATTON-PORTER II	27
JEANNETTE PORTER MEEHAN	
WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE WORLD	29
A REVIEW OF THE MONTH'S ACTIVITIES BY COL. EDWARD M. HOUSE, ROBERT SHERWOOD, LAURENCE STALLINGS, STARK YOUNG, DEEMS TAYLOR, REV. JOSEPH FORT NEWTON, D. D., HELEN TAFT MANNING.	
HANDS UP!	36
HILDEGARDE FILLMORE	
NIGHT AND DAYTIME CARE OF THE CHILD	38
JOHN B. WATSON	
THE OUT OF DOORS CHILD	40
CHARLES GILMORE KERLEY, M. D.	
DESSERTS FOR EVERY DAY	42
SARAH FIELD SPLINT	

FISH, FEASTS AND FASTS	48
LILIAN M. GUNN	
IT PAYS TO BE BORN IN CHICAGO	54
DOROTHY COCKS	
SPRING FEVER	59
E. V. MCCOLLUM & NINA SIMMONDS	
THE NEW YORK IMPULSE	60
HARRY E. CHARLOT	
ADVENTURES IN HOME BUILDING	62
RHYS NORTH AND MARCIA MEAD	
HOW WILL YOU TREAT YOUR WALLS!	64
HELEN HARFORD BALDWIN	
WHEN KITCHEN TIME IS SCARCE	74
MILDRED WEIGLEY WOOD	
TO BE UP-TO-DATE IN YOUR HOME-MAKING	79
THE POST BOX	156
EMILY PRICE POST	

FASHIONS

L' ECHO DE PARIS	129
NEW SILK AND LEATHER BAGS	131
FASHION TALKS, ANNE RITTENHOUSE	132
WELL CUT GOWNS ARE FIRST AID TO DANCERS	132
THE MODERN WOMAN RUNS TO POINTS	133
GOWNS THAT GO ABOUT WITHOUT THE CHAPELONAGE OF A COAT	134
IN WINTER FLORIDA BEGINS ITS INFLUENCE ON NEW ENGLAND FASHIONS FOR SUMMER	135
FROCKS THAT ARE MADE FOR WILD MARCH WINDS TO BLOW ABOUT	136
"AN ANIMATED PENCIL" SAYS JEAN PATOU	137
"A HUMAN MAYPOLE" SAYS LUCIEN LELONG	137
SHOULDERS RIGHT? THEN MARCH	138
WAISTLINES CATCH SPRING FEVER	139
SIMPLE AFTERNOON FROCKS	140
LONG COATS	141
HOUSE DRESSES AND LINGERIE	142
HOUSE DRESSES AND LINGERIE	143
CHILDREN'S FASHIONS	144
SPRING FELTS AND FLOWERS TO MATCH	150