

PERISHABLE

GOODS

by

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THE STORY IN RESUME:

JONATHAN MANSEL finds the safe in his London house robbed of a package of letters. He and his friends, George Hanbury and William Chandos, decide that their common enemy, "Rose" Noble, is the thief. Mansel tells them the letters are mere casual notes from Adele, wife of his cousin, Capt. Pleydell. He receives from the captain a wire announcing that Adele has disappeared in Austria. Accompanied by his two friends, Mansel dashes there by motor. Capt. Pleydell, in bed with a broken leg, reports that the search has led to a blank. Chandos discovers that Noble and his gang are secreted in the castle of Gath, situated on a mountain top. In the dead of the night Mansel and his forces enter an unoccupied wing of the old fortress. They are overheard, and Adele cries a warning to come no further. They pretend to leave, but Mansel and Chandos hide in an archway until the next night, when they re-enter the castle and take Adele to their hiding place. They are discovered by Noble, who again gains possession of Adele. Mansel pretends to fall and hurt himself and is taken in hand by Noble. Believing Mansel unable to walk, Noble leaves him unguarded and goes up to the roof. Mansel locks him out of the castle. Noble finds Chandos hiding on the roof and takes him to a thicket that commands the castle's only exit.

INSTALLMENT XII.

Two Bullets.

"I RECKON he's sweating," said Rose Noble. I was wide awake in an instant. With the tail of my eye I could see that, except that Bunch was eating and Punter had taken his place, nothing had changed.

"Sweating blood," said Noble. "One Willie up on the drop, and, unless he gets a move on, the other walks into our arms as soon as it's dark."

"Complete with car," said Bunch, licking his lips. Noble shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe," he said. "But I guess they'll give us the cars before we're through."

Punter looked down from his post on the lip of the dell.

"He can lay to meeting 'is Gawd, if he comes out."

"That's why he's sweating," said Noble. "This garden's all right from the castle wall, but it's just a shade too wild for a good close-up."

"Suicide 'All," said Bunch. "But 'e won't 'ave a dart by daylight. 'E knows—"

"Yes, he will," said Noble. "He'll never wait ten hours, while his Willies are getting wet. He'll bring two o' the servants with him, an' they'll come right up in a line."

Punter looked around.

"Didn't we ought to spread, Rose?"

The other shook his head.

"Stop one an' you stop the lot. Say we lay out a servant—well, what'll Big Willie do? Fall on his — stomach an' pray to God. He's only the wood to shoot at, an' he's three down instead of two. An' that's when we move. By the time he's got his soul straight, I guess I'll be ready to flip a fly off his — nose."

"You don't wan' to kill 'im," said Bunch. "If you—"

"Kill him?'" breathed Noble. "Kill him?'"

I could hear him suck in his breath. "No, I'm not going to kill him. And if I were you, I wouldn't so much as loose off, if you see his face—in case you killed him, for if you did by —, I'd feed your tripe to a mongrel before your eyes."

A prudent silence succeeded this horrid threat, which was not so much spoken as snarled and suggested a return of the temper with which the monster was ridden a while before. For my part, I would have welcomed that cold, black mood, for now his manner argued a confidence so rich and ripe and lazy as made me twice as hopeless as I had been before.

"I'm going to sell him," said Noble. "Hang him up on a wall of that court—expose him for sale, with a bucket on either foot—the way they made Poky remember the name of his bank. If he don't buy himself in, I guess the Willies'll think when they see the weights. An' before we reach the reserve, I guess the goods will ask him to change his mind."

"But see here, Rose," said Punter. "They won't 've the cash to pay with, an' 'ow can we wait? That — chemist."

"Who wants to wait?" said Noble. "I'll take their — word. O, I guess they've got false bottoms, the same as any one else. I wouldn't trust Mansel a foot—if none of his like could hear. But at one of 'em pass his word in front of his — and, an' he hasn't the spunk to break it for fear they'll think he's a swab. That's what they mean when they talk of noblesse oblige, or, if you want plain English, don't let 'em see your dirt."

The venom with which he uttered this ugly argument declared the deadly hatred he bore us all, and I could not help wondering what was the fellow's history, for he had a commanding presence and was by no means common, as Punter and Bunch, while his speech was constantly betraying a considerable education, which for some unaccountable reason he seemed to despise.

Punter took a deep breath.

"This time tomorrow," he said, "we'll be on the — road."

"Out of the country, you mean, and pushing for —"

Bunch looked up from his victuals.

"Wot price the customs?" he said. "I'll shift the — car, but there's photos stuck on to 'er papers, an' I don't wan' to be asked why I'm drivin' stolen car."

Noble yawned.

"I guess we'll give one of the Willies a lift to —"

ance. They'll have to go back to London to — the wind. An' he'll put us through the cusoms—if we remember to ask him while Mansel's on the wall."

They took my pistol and knife, locked them up in a cupboard, and took the key. Then they locked every door except the door to the roof and that of the room in which I lay. Well, that washed out George and the servants, for they were in the oratory, very properly biding their time. Then they handcuffed Adele to my bedpost, and when she slipped out of the cuff they clipped her ankle instead. Then Rose Noble sat down and watched me—from a chair at the foot of the bed. Adele told me afterwards that he never took his hand from his pocket or his eyes from my face. If you can conceive a tighter place than that, I'd like to hear what it is.

"Well, the 'doctor' appeared, and before he'd said thirty words Noble was out of the room. When I rose to follow Adele almost bent it again. She started up, forgetting her ankle was fast to the leg of the bed. I just managed to catch her in time.

"I shut the door to the roof and started to look for the keys. I found them at last, high up in a niche in the wall. Then I unlocked the doors. I had no idea where George and the servants were, and, as luck would have it, I tried the oratory last. Not until then did I go back to the 'doctor' and ask about you. To my horror, I learned he had left you up on the roof.

"Of course I realized I had shut the door in your face, and when I rushed back to listen I could hear Noble speaking and you reply. I took Bell's pistol, posted George and Rowley as best I could, and cautiously opened the door, to find that the roof was empty and the opposite door was shut. This made me think very hard. Although he knew we had rope, Noble was giving us the roof; but the gifts of a man like that are always dangerous, and I instantly wondered if he meant to take the wood."

"A moment's reflection convinced me that this was so.

"In the first place, to use his own words, 'if ever it got to a dog fight, the fellow that had this thicket was bound to win'; in the second, the dog fight was coming—there was any amount to suggest that the servants were in; the castle would soon be unhealthy, because of the doctor's friends; and, then, the cars for the taking and Carson as well; finally, he knew I should seek you, and the very best place in which to hold you prisoner was therefore the wood."

"There was not a moment to lose. We couldn't go down the cliff, for we hadn't sufficient rope, and our only chance was to reach the wood by the spur not only before Noble but before he was in a position to see us go.

"I left George and Rowley with Adele, who was now as safe as a house, and Bell and I slid down from the roof to the spur. The 'doctor,' a gallant old fellow, drew up the rope behind us and then slipped back to the tower. Believe me, I ran for this wood with my heart in my mouth."

"When we made the drive I sent Bell off for Carson and lay in wait. Almost at once you appeared. I watched you come out of the window and start for the wood, but when I felt for my pistol it wasn't there."

"I'd give it to Bell before I went down the rope, and in the rush I'd forgotten to ask for it back."

"Well, there was nothing to be done. I retired, marked you to cover, and then went off to pick up Carson and Bell. I'm afraid the delay cost you dear, for I had to be careful to meet them a long way back and, of course, we had to come up without snapping a twig. But I think perhaps after all it was better so, for the sprint had unsteadied my hand, and if I had missed or anything else had slipped, you were a pretty good hostage and I was but one to three."

"The rest you know." He rose to his feet and stretched luxuriously. "And now, if you feel like moving, we'll get into one of the cars and go back to Adele. Carson and Bell are digging a certain grave, and I think we'll leave them to it—and him to them. To tell you the truth, I don't want to see him again. The sight of him rouses feelings that one shouldn't have against the dead. In his way, he was a great man, and if he'd had the help I've had, he'd have wiped me off the map. He hadn't a servant worth having—they let him down right and left; he practically stood alone; and even so, it took six of us all we knew to bring him down."

IT is not for me to review that valediction. I heard it in silence, and in silence I leave it now. The quarrel was not mine but Mansel's, and I will not pick over the blossoms he chose to lay upon the grave.

Without a word we made our way to the cars, and, taking the first, drove slowly out of the drive and down to the castle gate.

Then Mansel climbed in by the window that had the loose bar, and two minutes later he swung the great leaf open and I drove in.

When I was in the courtyard I stopped and sounded the horn. Before its echoes had died a casement of the oratory was opened and Hanbury put out his head.

"All over," said Mansel simply. "Open the doors."

He was on his way to the guardroom before I was out of the car, with Tester scrambling before him, agog to prove the promise of so unusual a field.

I followed leisurely, still thinking on the death of Rose Noble and of all that had passed, and trying to believe that the clock in the dashboard of the car was telling the truth when it said that the hour was no more than half past nine.

So I came to the guardroom and down the winding stair.

The passage door was open and Mansel was standing in the passage, fronting Adele. His back was towards me, but I saw that his head was bowed and he had her hand to his lips. The back of her other hand was across her eyes.

And between them and me crouched Casemate, framed in the passage doorway, pistol in hand. I let out a cry that might have been heard in Lass, but as I did so he fired, and I saw Mansel stagger a little and then sink down on his knees. Before Casemate could turn, I had knocked him flat on his face and was kneeling upon his back. Then I took my knife and drove it into his spine. But the mischief was done.

Mansel was still alive, but the bullet had entered his stomach, and there was death in his face.

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(To be continued.)



Rose Noble fell back, staring

Punter spoke over his shoulder. "What Poky was that you mentioned? There was a Poky Barrett I saw in a Boston bar. But he was a little old screw, with a jerky leg." Noble laughed. "Poky Barrett," he said, "is forty-two." "Go on," said Punter, incredulously. "Forty-two," said Noble. "But he had an illness—somehow I got to my knees and tried to speak. The three watched me curiously."

I THREW myself down and rubbed my head on the ground in a wild endeavor to tear the gag from my mouth. I heard Punter laugh and say something about a dog. The attempt exhausted me and was utterly in vain. When I got again to my knees my face was streaming with sweat.

Noble looked at me and lifted his lids. "An illness," he said softly. "Some people might say an attack. It changed him . . . unbelievably. And the jerky leg came on about the same time. You see, when he wouldn't answer, somebody happened to touch his sciatic nerve."

With a bursting head, I flung myself back on the turf.

I can never describe the agony of that hour.

I knew that Mansel would come, and I knew he would come before dark. He would never wait for ten hours before starting to my relief; and Carson had to be saved from walking clean into a trap. He had not rope enough to go by the cliff—the spur was his only way. And so he would come, by daylight, up to the wood. If he came, he was doomed. He could be seen approaching for two hundred yards or more, and no cunning could ever avail him against an ambushade. There was no scope for cunning. The wood was dense, while, except for four or five trees, the spur was bare. I had no hope for him, and if I had, Noble's air would have killed it, for he, the soul of prudence, was awaiting his enemy's coming, with his hands, so to speak, in his pockets and his sword in the rack.

Of what was to follow his wounding, I tried not to think.

Whoever was with him would be taken, alive or dead, and Carson would walk into the shambles soon after the sun had set. With me for spokesman, those that were left in the castle would be apprised of the truth, and, no doubt, at dawn the next day Adele and Hanbury and I would be pleading with prayers and fortunes for the life of a broken man. And so the play would finish—in a welter of blood and tears. Redress was not to be thought of; the chances of vengeance would not be worth taking up. Then the law would step in, pick over the ghastly business, madden us all with its ritual, ask unanswerable questions, and believe what it chose. A hideous publicity would follow: the names of Adele and Mansel would be in every one's mouth; reporters would cluster round Poganec; charabancs would be run to the castle of Gath.

In this affliction of spirit I again and again forgot my bodily distress. This was as well, for the gag choked me and had broken the sides of my mouth, my wrists seemed to be on fire, the pain in my head was raging, and I might have been covered with blankets, so fast was I streaming with sweat. At times I made sure I was sickening for some disease, but I think that it was the tightness as well of my clothing as my bonds which, joined with the heat of the day, not only made me so hot but caused my blood to rebel against such usage.

Bunch drained his bottle of wine and lay down to sleep. Before he did so he took a scarf from

his pocket and bound my feet, and so put out the spark of hope I had cherished that, when the moment came, I could hurl myself into the bushes and betray his danger to Mansel by means of the noise I made.

Noble was speaking. "I guess you'll remember today. It'll spoil the greenwood for you for the rest of your life. When you see the sun on the leaves and you hear the birds piping around I guess you'll remember today, and when you remember I reckon you'll wish it was raining and that the boughs were bare."

"Maybe it'll learn you something that they don't teach at Oxford or the schools for pretty, young boys. Stick to your — last. Live an' let live. If somebody pulls your nose, go to the police. Keep your — tadpoles an' watch 'em turn into frogs, but leave the deep sea fishing to them that know."

"When Mansel climbed into that strong box he cut his throat. He gave me this wood for the taking—just the kind of damn fool error a squirt like Mansel would make. The poor trash couldn't see that, if ever it got to a dog fight, the — that had this thicket was bound to win."

IF the fellow's words enraged me, I think that they angered him.

He knew as well as I did that we could not have taken the castle and held the wood as well and that Mansel had had to stake all upon freeing Adele; he knew that Mansel had taken trick after trick, though the game was not of his choosing and every card was marked—that Mansel could still win the odd . . . and the game and the rubber and all . . . if he would but sit still in the castle and let Carson and me take our chance. He had sought to belittle the man who in fourteen days had achieved what Rose Noble himself had believed three impossible feats, first of all finding a needle out of a bottle of hay, then seizing a very bastille, and, finally, plucking his lady out of the lion's mouth. He had sought to diminish Mansel and he had failed, because the facts were against him and he had no sort of material with which to build his case. This poverty made him wroth, and could he have called back his words I think he would. But, since he could not, he started to curse and swear, reviling Mansel in filthy and blasphemous terms and working himself into a very passion, because, I fancy, he knew that with every execration he was, so to speak, but further exposing his sores.

Throughout this exhibition Bunch was pretending slumber and Punter never moved, whilst I, of course, lay as I was, for, now that my feet were bound, I could not stir.

At last the storm blew itself out, and, after a decent silence, Noble turned to the future and left the past.

"I guess Jute'll bite his thumbs when he finds we're gone."

Bunch propped himself on an elbow and let out an oath.

"Serve 'im — well right," he spouted, "the dirty goat. Sits down in that — village an' leaves us to get the wet. I know 'is — idea of keepin' the background warm. Oysters an' girls an' movies an' a skinful every night."

"He had his orders," said Noble, "an' he's broken

'em twice. If he'd done as I told him we shouldn't have had this fuss. But maybe it's as well. It don't amuse me to suckle an insubordinate — that's let me down."

This definite intimation that no claim by Jute would be paid was greeted by Punter and Bunch with the highest glee, partly, no doubt, because each was expecting to profit by such a rule, but mainly, I think, because they detested Jute, and the thought of his losing his share did their hearts good. Indeed, had they known the truth—that Jute was no longer alive to lodge his claim—they could not have been better pleased. They crowed and giggled like children, abused the dead man with a relish which must have made him turn in his grave, and showed an impatience for action which all their approaching welfare had failed to inspire.

Punter shook his fist at the castle and cried aloud. "Come out, you —, and take your gruel."

"Easy now," said Noble. "He knows that he's for the high jump, and I guess you'd straighten your tie before buying that hop."

"Rose," says Bunch, all of a twitter, "are you sure we'd better not spread? You know. Just in case—"

Noble sat up.

"If and when I say so, but not before. What the hell's the use of spreading before they show up? Or even then?"

"None whatever," said Mansel.

Then a shot was fired just behind me, and Rose Noble fell back, staring, with the blood running into his eyes.

HIMSELF, Mansel unbound me and took the gag from my mouth, while Carson and Bell, who were with him, stood covering Punter and Bunch—in a way, a needless precaution, for the two seemed stupefied and gazed about them slowly, as though they had just been translated into another world. And so, I suppose, in a sense, they had been, for Noble was stone dead, shot through the brain.

When he saw the state of my mouth Mansel drew in his breath. Then his hands went under my arms and he lifted me up.

There was a rill in the wood—we had heard the fuss of its water whenever we used the drive. This we sought in silence, for I was just past speaking, and Mansel held his tongue. Indeed, he had his hands full, for, though I could walk, I had lost my sense of balance and but for his arms must have fallen a score of times.

The water revived me, but when I would have spoken Mansel stopped me at once.

"All in good time," said he. "Those swine must be disposed of, and the cord's way back with the cars. You will stay here and rest, and I'll come back and find you as soon as ever I can."

With that he was gone and I turned again to the water and drank my fill.

After a little I lay back and gazed at the sky. To tell the truth, I was thankful to be alone.

I had been just as much shaken as Punter and Bunch, and the world seemed out of focus to my laboring brain.

One moment the enemy was rampant and the next Rose Noble was dead; before he had left the castle Mansel had appeared in the wood; the inevitable had not happened, the impossible come to pass.

More than once an absurd fear seized me that it was all a dream, and, indeed, I was still uneasy, when I heard a comfortable sound—the sigh of one of the autos.

Ten minutes later Tester was licking my face. "It's very simple," said Mansel, filling a pipe. "The whole of the credit is yours. You cut the Gordian knot; and when, because of my failure, our case was ten times worse than it had been before, you pulled the whole show round and did the trick."

To this I demurred, but he brushed my protests aside.

"Listen," he said. "They carried me in and laid me down on a bed in the middle room of the tower."