

THE MAGIC MAN

By Hallie Erminie Rives

(Continued from page five.)

chapter of "Moby Dick." Once it had been "When We Were Very Young," and Roselius had bellowed with laughter at the effect of the delicious juvenilities rendered in the toneless timbre of Miss Thorp's matter of fact voice.

In the routine the days had sped swiftly. Roselius took little note of time and seasons. When Faris made comment on it he grunted, "Bah! What does it matter how fast or how slow we drift through this three dimensional space? Time means no more to me, thank God, than it does to Einstein! I'm too busy to keep track of it."

To Canuck, however, the passage of time had been significant and momentous. He had made the discovery that human knowledge is cumulative. That the interest it pays for its acquisition is compounded every day. That each discouragement conquered makes the next less deep. He had gained a victory on that midnight when he had poured the whisky back into the bottle, though he did not know it, and with it had come strength to resist the temptation that had fallen upon him again and again thereafter, to throw up the sponge and sink away somewhere, anywhere, a coward and a quitter.

But there had been always the sick thought of Rose. Her unbearable nearness and sweetness—not for him!

Like a pool into which the stream of her life had poured, to eddy in continual revolution. She was always watching, mentally recording, secretly rejoicing over each new achievement of his. She had seen him bearing doubt, pain, disheartenment, toil, weariness—all with tenacious purpose, with a joke and a laugh.

She had grown insensibly to lean upon his effervescing spirits on gloomy days, to store in her memory his breezy slang, the warm modulations of his voice, his characteristic gestures and mannerisms. She had been puzzled by his moods of late; his silences and hesitations, the manifest efforts that clouded the bubbling fun and laughter, the dulling in his talk of that quality of wistfulness that she had always found so appealing.

Perhaps she noted these things less because she had herself been passing through a confusion of sensations from which had slowly emerged the feeling that an old page had been turned over, a new one exposed, waiting a new chapter. How was it to begin? What was it to tell? Strange voices were calling to her, but the sound of the words was just beyond the limit of the audible.

THERE had been a fierce squall that had whirled suddenly down from the north in a flurry of lightning and passed with a light pelting of rain which the glory of the returning sunshine turned to a powdering of diamonds over all the trees and grass. Too beautiful to last!

So Canuck was thinking as he stood on the pebbled path in the noon hour smoking a cigaret. When a thing was lovely and perfect, he reflected gloomily, that was when it vanished.

He lifted his eyes to see Rose coming from her studio in a loose linen smock-trunk plentifully daubed with wet clay from a morning's modeling.

"Hello!" she said. "What's the matter lately?"

"How the matter?"

"One never sees you in between times. You're certainly the bear for work nowadays. You're getting to be as bad as Rah-rah."

He smiled now. "I wish I thought I was getting like him. I'd like to be. You see—there's so much I have to catch up with."

"You're doing it, you know," she assured him. "Rah-rah's growing to depend on you terrifically."

"That's just his way of keeping a fellow chirped up."

She shook her head. "He'll miss you frightfully if you leave."

His jaw dropped. "If I leave?"

"O," she said hastily, "I only thought, perhaps—when Dr. Florian comes—you know he and the baroness are coming over again in September?—he might—"

Something approaching panic had come into his eyes. "You don't suppose they'd want me to go back with them? Surely they wouldn't think I'd leave—Mr. Roselius?"

"Then you'd go if it weren't for Rah-rah?"

"I—no, I didn't mean that."

"It would be only natural if you should want to," she went on tentatively, digging the toe of her shoe into the gravel. "You must have a lot of friends on the other side."

"If I have, I've forgotten them, with all the rest of it. I've stopped caring about it."

"But—you might have some one special friend—some one you—liked very much. She wouldn't—"

"There never was any *she*!" he cried with a little bitterness.

"If you can't remember, how do you know?"

"I'd remember that. My instinct would tell me."

She laughed. "I have an invitation for you. Does your instinct tell you what it's for?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Mrs. Ambriester's giving a theater party, and Ronnie Chandos is taking a few of us to a cabaret afterward."

"Fine!" he said. "Who's going? To the club, I mean."

"Only half a dozen. You and I, and Ronnie and Mimi Ambriester, and Lulu Minetree and Mitch Schuyler. Why?"

The animation faded out in his face. "I—I don't believe I—"

She looked at him keenly. "I thought you liked to dance—with me."

"I do. But—"

"But what?"

"Schuyler doesn't like me."

"You only imagine that. Besides, what difference does it make if he doesn't?"

"Why, isn't he—I thought—"

There was a poignant pause while she gazed meditatively down the drive. "I wonder," she said at length, "just what you're thinking."

"I naturally supposed he wouldn't enjoy seeing us dance together."

"Why not?"

"Aren't you," Canuck floundered, "engaged to him?"

"Certainly not!"

He started. A sudden fierce joy was piercing the gloom that had so long overspread the material universe. "You haven't been? You're not going to—marry him?"

"To the best of my knowledge, no."

She walked on along the path, leaving him with his heart pounding and the wind singing a wild song in the treetops.

The Great White Way, in all its glitter and frailty and festivity, was teeming with its nightly crowds when the play—



Was he
a coward, then?
A pitiful
yellow cur?

pitiful, yellow
cur? He almost

groaned aloud. If only Rose were not there!

He turned to her.

"Go to the car and wait," he said hoarsely. But she shook her head.

Devitt's arm crooked back for the blow, but the cabaret's proprietor, who had wormed eel-like through the crowd, caught his wrist.

"Hold on, Blondy!" he said in panic. "Nix with the rough-house here!—Take it outside!"

He struggled with him ineffectually. "Be good, Blondy!" he besought.

In that harrowing moment Canuck fought a battle with himself that was, in its way, as significant as any he was ever to wage again.

It was a hand-to-hand fight with the fear that had dogged him mercilessly in his lost years. It had always conquered then, but he was opposing it now with the new weapon of self-respect and from the new foothold his feet had found on the causeway of life.

And by the second's margin he won. As Blondy threw off Jake Wolfshelm's hand with a bristling oath there surged over Canuck, in a wave of assurance, the knowledge that, suddenly and miraculously, he was no longer afraid.

Canuck the whole atmosphere of the place was vaguely disturbing. It carried a suggestion of things more flaring behind the scenes, of old and hidden activities that engaged like coals with his fresh and breathing present. He looked at the dancer, frowning. She wore a brown dress, medallioned with conventional spider webs, in whose centers were spiders with legs of glistening wire that moved with her every motion.

Rose's hand, in Canuck's arm, clutched it hard. She had suddenly become conscious that the girl's eyes were on them. Dancing Fritz was watching them with a slow smile. Her languorous eyelids drooped, and her short upper lip, red as a pomegranate against the enamel of her face, curled from her white teeth.

Rose did not relish the scrutiny. As the music stopped she stole a glance at Canuck's face, then looked again at the dancer—she was coming toward them.

Fritz came to Canuck and caught both his hands. "Kid! Kid!" she cried. "Where've you been all this time?"

He stood flushed, perturbed, bewildered, for it seemed no cry of mere badinage. It held a blazing effrontery of ownership. She was all at once leaning toward him, her lips parted, her breast rising and falling. A strange yet familiar perfume was in his nostrils. "Look at me, Kid!"

The voice sounded across the silence. Every one was standing up staring, the musicians craning from their *dais*, and he drew back, hideously conscious of the general observation, painfully aware of Rose beside him.

"Please—please!" he stammered.

But she would not be put off. She took hold of the lapels of his coat, smuggling against him. Under her painted and cheapened hardness and the devil-may-care of liquor Rose discerned something that was neither falsehood nor all affectation, and at the realization a wave of repulsion, so tingling and acute that it dismayed and frightened her, welled up in her.

"What you handin' me? Tryin' to make me think you've forgot me?"

"Say," he said sharply, "cut that out, won't you?" Then, turning to Rose, "let's get out of this."

Some one laughed.

Fritz had drunk from too many hip pocket flasks that night. The laugh flicked her on the raw. Her mouth drew to a rigid crescent. Angry stabs of light darted from her eyes. She forgot all that Schuyler had told her, everything but that Canuck had come back to hand her the frozen face before the crowd. She was suddenly shrill with the candor of her kind.

"Maybe you don't want to know me any more." She looked at Rose and burst into satiric laughter. "You think now, because—"

She broke off as a burly figure with an upthrust cow-lick elbowed through the crowd and a husky voice growled: "Get back, Fritz. I'll take care of this bird for you."

Canuck's eyes were fixed on the man who had just spoken. "You stay outta this, Blondy!" she told him, but his heavy arm swept her aside. There was uproar now. All around tables were shoving, men pushing, women shrinking back.

The blood had left Canuck's face. A sick vibration was running through him, and he felt himself visibly trembling. He was afraid—every cringing nerve in his body longed for a hole to crawl into. Was he a coward, then? A

At the same instant two men burst into the tense circle: one Devitt's pal and partner, Doloff, and the other Ronnie Chandos. The latter had just arrived with the rest of the party, and, seeing Canuck in what looked like a sizable row, had bucked the line with the verve of an old Princeton tackle. Having disposed of the interference, he delivered himself of the remark that was to be famous

"Go to it!" Chandos snapped. "Mitch and I'll see you've got a fair field."

He had time for only this, for Blondy was coming back like a mad bull, while Wolfshelm's voice pierced the confusion in a wail of agony: "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Can't nobody stop it?" And a man's voice somewhere answered with a hiccup: "Stop it? You're crazy! Let's make up a purse for the winner!"

AS Rose, breathless and quivering, saw Canuck's slim, eager body, moving in that swift *mélée*, circling and doubling from the clinch, his blows shooting clean and sure, she felt her hands in Mimi Ambriester's ferocious grasp. The latter was shaking violently with an emotion of pure delight.

"O, Rose!" she breathed. "Isn't he splendid? I tried to see the Dempsey go, but father locked me up. I wouldn't have missed this for worlds!"

Rose's emotions were at the moment too complex to admit of reply. Her whole being was flaming with hot resentment, a sense of outrage and impotent hatred mingled with pity. Resentment at this implication of ancient relations, the knowledge of which stabbed her with a furious pain. Hatred of the girl who was now struggling with raging tears in the expository arms of Wolfshelm. Pity for the man who had been brought, by what seemed to her a baleful coincidence, into unwilling hand-touch with a chapter in that old life of his, now—thank God!—dead and done forever. And, strangely overlapping all, a passionate sense of pride.

The end was short and sharp. At one of Blondy's lunges Canuck writhed aside call-like, his left fist went out like a piston, there was a terrific crash of splintering chairs, and the cow-licked head met the floor with a thump that for its owner meant the end of a perfect day. Canuck did not wait for the count—as a matter of fact, the sexton of the lifted forefinger might have chanted a hundred.

When Canuck and Rose emerged from the babbling chaos, whereover the colored lanterns winked riddly into the street, Ronnie Chandos—with the tail of his eye cocked for brass buttons and riot sticks—was bustling the rest of the party to their cars like a brisk collie barking sheep into a corral. A shouted good-night, a flutter of girls' hands, and Canuck stepped on the accelerator and they flew bridgeward along the lighted, emptying streets.

He was full of a strange, light happiness that made him oblivious to the cut in his chin and the sizable rip in his tuxedo. Something mysterious had happened to him that gave him a warm tingling glow all over.

It was a while before either spoke. Then he said: "It was rotten for you to be let in for a thing like that!"

"O, that doesn't matter," Rose answered, furious at herself for the constraint that was tying her tongue. "You couldn't help it."

He grinned. "The little hussy! She had a nerve to try that on—spoofing her steady to make him jealous, I suppose. No wonder he lit into me!" He chuckled. "She's some actress! She had me going for a minute."

There was another long silence.

"Well," he said as they negotiated the bridge entrance, "we didn't get our dance, but we saw the play."

"Yes," she said.

But to herself she was saying in incredulous wonder: "I'm jealous! Jealous! I'm jealous of that girl in the cabaret!"

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(To be continued.)

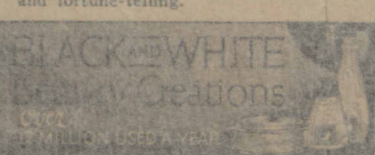


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