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Francis Stevens

Complete Works



Series Thirteen

The Complete Works of
FRANCIS STEVENS

(1884-1948)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

Gertrude Bennett

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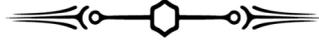
The Complete Works of
FRANCIS STEVENS



By Delphi Classics, 2023

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Complete Works of Francis Stevens



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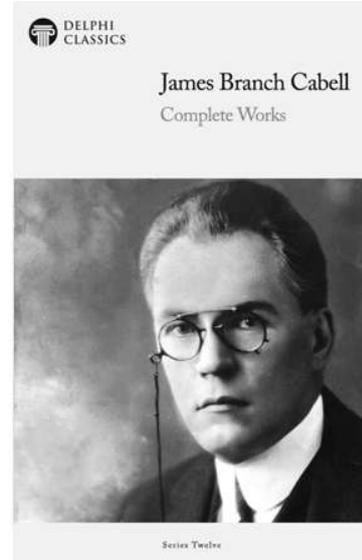
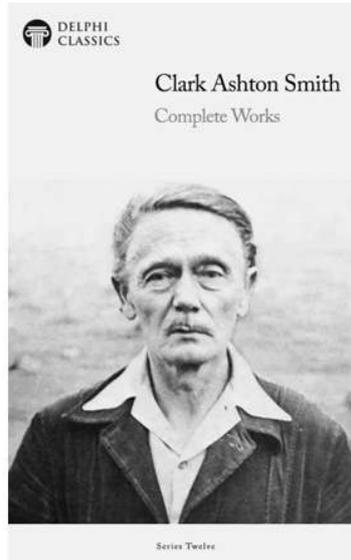
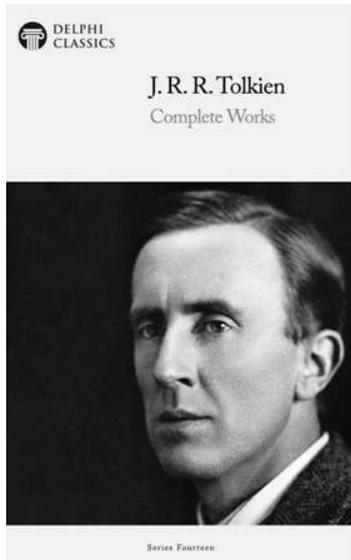
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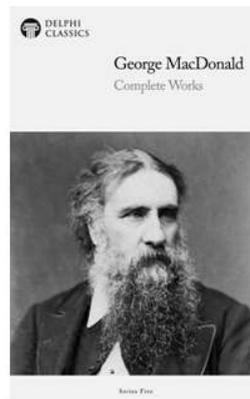
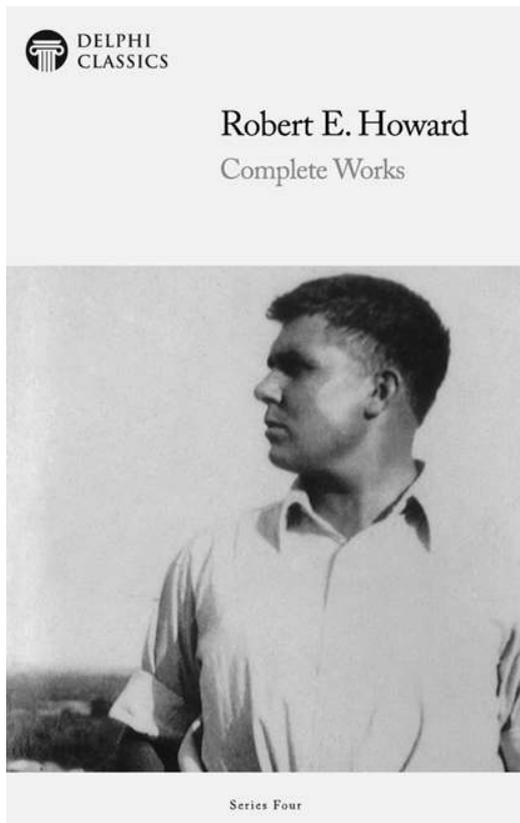
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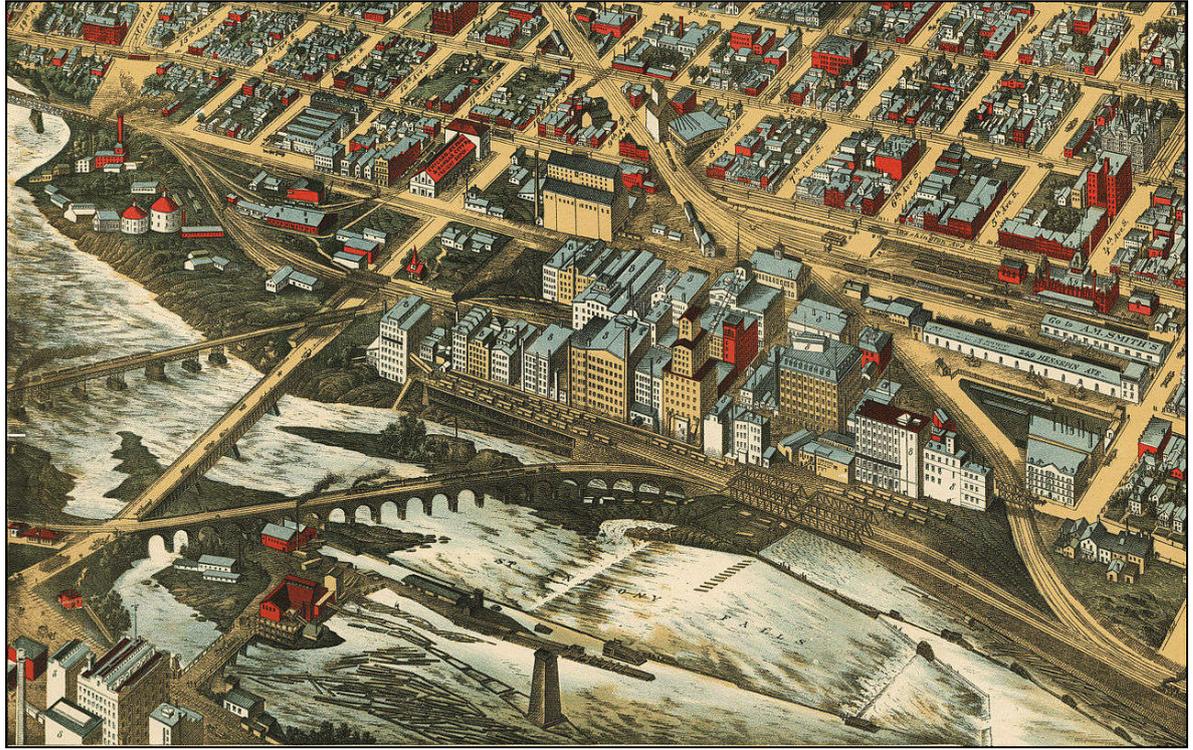
Explore worlds you never knew existed...



The Novels



Minneapolis, Minnesota — Francis Stevens' birthplace



Lithograph of Minneapolis, 1895

The Citadel of Fear (1918)



Gertrude Barrows Bennett, known by the pseudonym Francis Stevens, was born in Minneapolis in 1884, to Charles and Caroline Barrows (née Hatch). She completed school through the eighth grade, before attending night school in hopes of becoming an illustrator — a goal she never achieved. Instead, she began working as a stenographer, a position that she held on and off for the rest of her life.

She had written her first short story at the age of 17. It was a science fiction tale titled *The Curious Experience of Thomas Dunbar*. She mailed the story to *The Argosy*, which at the time was one of the top pulp magazines. The story was accepted and published in the March 1904 issue, under the byline “G. M. Barrows”. Although the initials disguised her gender, this appears to be the first instance of an American female author publishing science fiction and using her real name.

In 1909 she married Stewart Bennett, a British explorer, and moved to Philadelphia. A year later her husband died during a tropical storm while on a treasure hunting expedition. He had also been a newspaper reporter, which likely helped his widow contribute feature articles to the newspaper. With a newborn daughter to raise, Stevens continued working as a stenographer. When her father died toward the end of World War I, she next had to take care of her invalid mother.

In 1918 Stevens published her first and best known novel, *The Citadel of Fear*, in *The Argosy* across seven issues. It is a lost world story — a subgenre of science fiction and fantasy literature that involves the discovery of an unknown Earth civilisation. This genre had begun in the late-Victorian adventure romance fiction of H. Rider Haggard, notably his novel *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885). Stevens’ novel focuses on a forgotten Aztec city, which is “rediscovered” during World War I.

It tells the tale of two adventurers, an Irishman and an American, who discover in the wilds of Mexico the lost Aztec city of Tlapallan. One of the adventurers is possessed by an evil god, while the other falls in love with a woman from Tlapallan. Meanwhile, back home in America, the possessed man employs magic to mutate civilians. At the home of the Irishman’s sister, a rampaging monster wrecks the house one night, beginning a series of grisly twists and breathtaking turns, involving nightmare creatures, battling Aztec gods and indoor swamps...

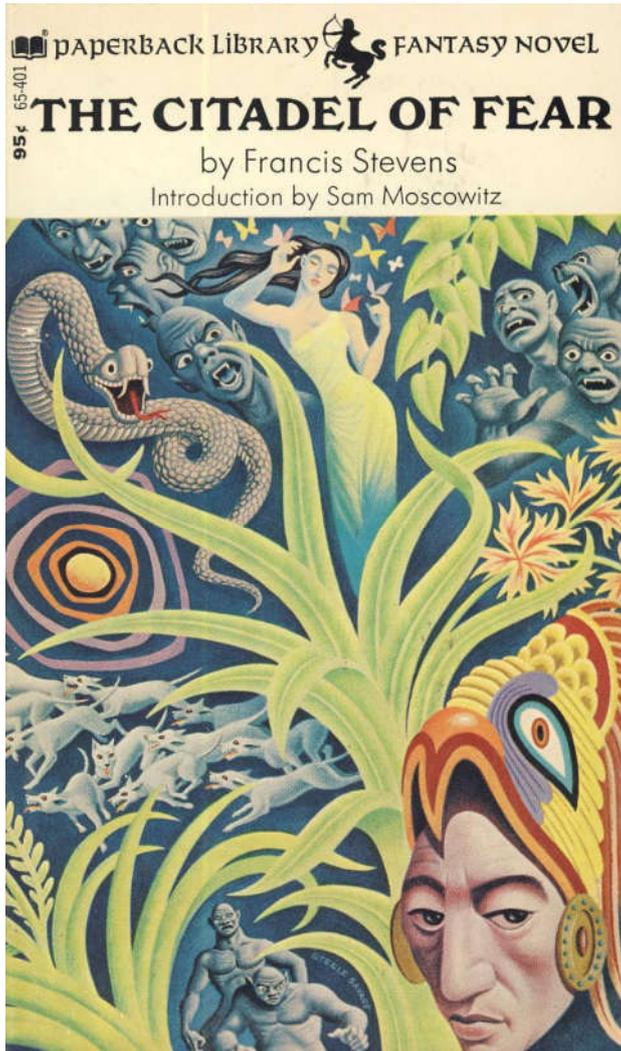
The Citadel of Fear is regarded by some critics as the novel that created ‘dark fantasy’, several years before H. P. Lovecraft became widely known in the field. Stevens’ debut novel is noted for its abrupt jumps in the plot, changing the course of the narrative completely after several chapters, using the first third of the novel eventually as a backstory. Perhaps, the editor at *The Argosy* was nervous about just how strange the tale was and so asked Stevens to make it more ‘grounded’ to retain the interest of ‘normal’ readers. Although the style seems to change dramatically, Stevens keeps the unnatural creatures that had appeared early on, founding a style of fantasy that had never been quite so terrifying and dark...



'Citadel of Fear' first appeared in 'The Argosy' in 1918.

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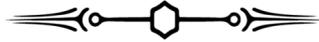
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The first edition, 1970, paperback

CHAPTER I

Hidden in the Hills



“DON’T LEAVE ME — All — in — —” The words were barely distinguishable, but the tall figure in the lead, striding heavily through the soft, impeding sand, heard the mutter of them and paused without turning. He stood with drooped head and shoulders, as if the oppression of the cruel, naked sun were an actual weight that pressed him earthward. His companion, plowing forward with an ultimate effort, sagged from the hips and fell face downward in the sand.

Apathetically the tall man looked at the twitching heap beside him. Then he raised his head and stared through a reddening film at the vast, encircling torture pen in which they both were trapped.

The sun, he thought, had grown monstrous and swallowed all the sky. No blue was anywhere. Brass above, soft, white-hot iron beneath, and all tinged to redness by the film of blood over sand-tormented eyes. Beyond a radius of thirty yards his vision blurred and ceased, but into that radius something flapped down and came tilting awkwardly across the sand, long wings half-spread, yellow head lowered, bold with an avid and loathsome curiosity.

“You!” whispered the man hoarsely, and shook one great, red fist at the thing. “You’ll not get your dinner off me nor him while my one foot can follow the other!”

And with that he knelt down by the prostrate one, drew the limp arms about his own neck, bowed powerful shoulders to support the body, and heaved himself up again. Swaying, he stood for a moment with feet spread, then began a new and staggering progress. The king-vulture flapped lazily from his path and upward to renew its circling patience.

After years in hell, where he was doomed forever to bear an intolerable burden across seas of smoking fire, the tall man regained a glimmering of reason. It came with the discovery that he was lying flat on his stomach, arms and breast immersed in liquid coolness, and that he was gulping water as fast and as greedily as swollen tongue and lips would permit.

With a self-control that saved two lives, he forced himself to cease drinking, but laved in the water, played in it with his hands, could scarcely believe in it, and at the same time thanked God for its reality. So sanity came closely back, and with clearing vision he saw the stream that meant salvation to sundrained tissues.

It was a deep, narrow, rapid flood, rushing darkly by and tugging at his arms with the force of its turbulent current. Flowing out from a rocky gorge, it lost itself again round a curving height of rocks.

What of the white-hot torture-pit? He was in shadow now, blessed, cool, revivifying. But — alone.

Dragging himself by sheer will-power from the water, the tall man wiped at his eyes and stared about. There close by lay a motionless heap of brown, coated with sand in dusty patches, white sand in the tumble of black hair at one end of it.

Very cautiously the tall man got to his feet and took an uncertain step toward the huddled figure. Then he shook one dripping red fist toward a wide, shimmering expanse that lay beyond the shadow of the rocks.

“You missed us,” he muttered with a chuckle almost childishly triumphant, “and you’ll never get us — not while — my one foot can follow the other!”

Then he set himself to revive the companion he had carried through torment on his shoulders, bathing the face, administering salvation by cautious driblets on the blackened, leather-dry lips and tongue. He himself had drunk more and faster. His already painful stomach and chest told him that.

But this other man, having a friend to minister, need take no such chance with his life. From his face the sand was washed in little white rivulets; his throat muscles began to move in convulsive twitches of swallowing.

As he worked, the tall man cast an occasional glance at the gorge from which flowed the stream. Below was the desert; above, craggy heaps and barren stretches of stone towered skyward. Blind and senseless, led by some inner guidance, say instinct rather than sense, he had dragged himself and his fellow-pro prospector from the desert’s hot, dry clutch. Would the hills prove kinder? Water was here, but what of food?

He glanced again up the gorge and saw that beside the swift water there was room for a man to walk. And downstream drifted a green, leafy branch, hurrying and twisting with the current.

* * * * *

As liquid iron cools, withdrawn from the fire, so the desert cooled with the setting of the sun, its furnace. Intolerable whiteness became purple mystery, overhung by a vault of soft and tender blue, that deepened, darkened, became set with a million flashing jewels.

And under the stars cool night-winds roved, like stealthy, invisible prowlers. Up among the rocks they came, stirring the hair of two escaped prisoners of the sun as if with curious fingers.

As their chill, stealthy breath struck through to his heated body the smaller man shivered in his sleep. His companion rolled over and took the unblanketed form in his arms; to share with it his own warmth and unconquerable vitality.

Dawn came, a hint of dun light. The stars faded and fled in a moment, and saffron glory smote the desert into transitory gold. One man had slept little and the other much, but it was the first who rose strongly from the bare rock and roused the second to action.

“We’re our own men again,” he asserted with confident optimism. “’Tis time we were proving it, and though cold water’s a poor breakfast, that’s but encouragement to find a better. Come, now. Stand up on your own two feet, Mr. Kennedy, the way we may be seeking it.”

Unwillingly the other raised himself. His face, save for the dark stubble of a three days’ divorce from the razor, was clean-shaven, and his black hair, dark, alert eyes, and the tan inflicted by a Mexican sun, gave him almost the look of an Indian.

His companion, on the other hand, was of that blond, freckled type which burns, but hardly tans at all, and his young, homely face flamed red beneath a thatch of hair nearly as ruddy.

Well over six fit in height, lean, tough, with great loose-moving shoulders and slim waist, Colin O’Hara looked what he was, a stalwart young Irishman whose full power was yet to come with years, but who even at twenty excelled most men in strength and stamina. Under his worn flannel shirt the muscles played, not in lumpy hillocks, but in those long, easy curves that promise endless endurance.

“Come along,” he repeated. “They’ll be waiting breakfast for us up the arroyo.”

“Who will? Oh — just some more of your nonsense, eh? Can’t we even starve to death without your joking over it?”

“And for why should we starve; little man? Take the edge off your temper with this, then.”

He tossed over something which Kennedy caught with eager hands, and bit through its gray-green skin almost before looking at it.

“A lechera pear, eh?” He gulped and bit again. “Where did you get it?” The other pointed at the rushing stream. “It came floating down last night and I saved it, thinking you might need a bit of encouragement the morn.”

“Only one?” demanded Kennedy with a quick, greedily suspicious glance.

“Only one.”

Finishing the milky pulp hurriedly, the dark man washed its sticky juice from face and hands and turned with a grin.

“You’re a fool to have given it all away then — too big a fool for me to believe in. How many did you eat, really?”

The Irishman’s red brows drew together. He turned away.

“I gave you it all that I might be saved the carrying of you,” he flung back. “I’d enough o’ that yesterday.”

He was striding upstream now, and Kennedy followed, scowling at his swinging back.

“I say, Boots,” he called in a moment. “You know I meant nothing. You saved my life, I admit, and — thanks for the pear.”

“Boots” (the nickname being probably derived from the enormous pair of cowhides in which the young Irishman had essayed desert travel) flung back a brief: “It’s all right,” and tramped steadily on. He was not the man to quarrel over so trifling a matter.

As for their present goal, the best that even optimistic Boots hoped for was some uncultivated valley where they might precariously sustain life on wild fruit and such game as they could take without weapons.

Barren, unpopulated, forsaken even of the Indians, this region had an evil reputation. “Collados del Demonio,” Hills of the Fiend, the Mexicans called it. So far as Cuachictin at the desert’s rim the prospectors had come without trouble. Those were the days when Porfirio Diaz still kept his iron grip on the throat of Mexico, and by consequence even a “*puerco gringo*” might travel through it in safety.

But Cuachictin offered them no encouragement to further progress. Kennedy had tried in vain to persuade some native of that Indian settlement to accompany them as a guide. Gold? Ah, yes, there was gold in the hills. Gold in nuggets as big as your closed fist — so. But also devils.

Was it not known that in ancient days all Anahuac was inhabited by giants? Even now, in turning new fields, a man was likely to uncover their enormous bones. Their terrible white ghosts overran the hills. They hunted the hills with the ghosts of white cougars for companions. They would twist off the head of a man and swallow it and his soul like melon seeds. No, no! Blanket was not woven nor knife forged that would pay a man for being eaten, soul and all, by devils!

In the huge, half-rotted brown thing like a strange log which they finally dragged forth to support their story of giants, Kennedy recognized the thigh-bone of a mastodon! The prospectors yielded hope of conquering a superstition rooted in the prehistoric past, and set out alone.

It was true that they had reached their goal, the hills, but with their own bare hands for sole remaining equipment, and for provision the hope of what the country itself might offer.

Shadowed from above by beetling cliffs, the curving path of the torrent led them on. The gorge widened. They reached a sharp bend of the walls and rounded it.

“Saints above!” came Boots’ sharp ejaculation. “Mr. Kennedy, did you ever see the like o’ that?”

Mr. Kennedy made no reply. Had the gorge opened out upon a pit of flaming brimstone, neither man could have halted more abruptly nor stared with a greater amazement.

Their emotion, however, was the opposite of dismay. To eyes sand-tortured and sun-weary, the vista before them seemed hardly less blessed than paradise.

* * * * *

On either hand steep, thickly wooded bluffs ran parallel to the reach of a gorgeously flowering and fruitful ravine. Through its midst meandered the stream, broadly shallow between pleasant banks, till it reached the rocks and swirled to a somber turmoil of revolt.

But better than flower, or fruit, or sparkling river, the scene held a certain homelier significance. The groves of fruit trees were set in orderly ranks. *Pina noñas* raised their sharp spikes in rows of military alinement. Along the stream a brown path trended toward that which confirmed the meaning of all the rest — a gleam of white walls near the upper end of the ravine.

“A plantation!” cried Kennedy at last. “A plantation in the Collados del Demonio! And by report there isn’t a square foot of cultivated land within a hundred and fifty miles of this spot.”

Boots grinned cheerfully.

“Report’s a liar. Maybe it’s the house of the old hill devil himself we’ve blundered upon. So be, he owes us a breakfast for hunting him out!”

With the direct purpose of hungry men, they headed straight for those patches of shining white which betokened, as they supposed, the dobe house of a rancher.

In the orange groves, blossom and full golden sphere flourished side by side. Sapodillas, milk-pears, and ciruelas, hung with a million reddening globes, offered proof of generous soil and a kindly climate. Flocks of butterflies, crimson, blue, and metallic green, shared the air with humming birds whose plumage put the sailwings to shame for brightness. Musical-voiced blue sparrows, wild canaries and gaudy little parrakeets filled the trees with rainbow-hued vivacity.

“It’s Eden without the — —” began Boots, when *whir-r-r-r!* came a sharp warning from the long grass that bordered the path. Boots bowed in mock salutation toward the sound. “Asking your pardon, Mr. Rattler! Eden, serpent and all, is what I’d meant to be saying.”

“Don’t crack any of your fool jokes when we reach the house,” growled Kennedy. “Some of these Mexicans are as touchy as the devil.”

“Ah, now, you’d soon soothe ’em down with a scowl or so,” laughed Boots. “But — well, don’t you admire the look o’ that, Mr. Kennedy? It’s no ranch-house they have, but a full-fledged hacienda no less!”

It was true. Instead of the common dobe-plastered casa of a small rancher, the thinning trees revealed an establishment far more imposing. Wide-spread, flat-roofed, its walls even yet showing only in patches through rioting rose-vines, here was such a

residence as might be owned by any wealthy gentleman of Mexico. To find it in these hills, however, was as surprising as to discover a Fifth Avenue mansion at the heart of a Bornean jungle.

From one chimney, presumably over the kitchen, a thin curl of smoke was rising. This was the only visible sign of life within. And now it struck them that in the whole length of the ravine they had not seen so much as one peon at work among the plantations.

The hacienda seemed very silent. Behind the walls of its courtyard no dog barked nor cock crowed. Save for the musical tumult of birds, they might, have wandered into a valley of magic stillness.

"Smoke spells fire and fire spells food," asserted Boots. "The cook's awake, and 'tis shame if the rest be sleeping with the sun up these two hours. Will we walk in or knock, Mr. Kennedy? You've the better knowledge of what's considered fitting in these parts."

"Knocks," came the curt advice of his companion. He was eying the hacienda suspiciously, but as suspicion was Kennedy's normal attitude toward the world, Boots paid that no attention.

He boldly advanced toward the wooden outer gates that stood open, yielding a pleasant glimpse through two archways to the inner patio, with its palms, gay oleanders, and tinkling fountain. His fist smote loudly on a leaf of the open gates.

Almost immediately, the summons brought response. On pattering bare feet a child came flying out from among the palms, only to pull up abruptly when she perceived that the visitors were strangers. She was a pretty enough youngster, between three and four years old, with curling black hair, bright, solemn, dark eyes, and a skin surprisingly pink and white for a Mexican child. Her dress was a single slip of brown agave fiber, clean, however, and painstakingly embroidered.

"*Buenos dias, chiquita,*" greeted Boots, whose Spanish, though atrociously accented, generally served the purpose. "*Esta usted solo en la casa?*" (Are you alone in the house?)

The curly black head shook in solemn negation. Then the round face dimpled into laughter, and running straight to her giant questioner she put up chubby arms in an unmistakable plea. With an answering laugh the Irishman caught the baby up and set her on the towering height of his shoulder.

Kennedy frowned weary irritation.

"Are we to stand here all day?" he queried.

Leaning forward, the child peered down at him around the ruddy head of her swiftly chosen friend.

"Do 'way," she commanded calmly. "Red man nice — tum in. Black man do 'way— 'way, 'way off!" She emphasized the order in her unexpected baby English by a generous wave of her hand toward infinite outside spaces.

Boots' shout of mirth at this summary choice and dismissal produced two results. Kennedy's annoyance was increased, and a man came out from some door which the first archway concealed, and strode quickly toward them. Dressed in immaculate white, well-groomed and confident of bearing, here seemed the probable master of the hacienda.

"What is this? Put that child down, sir! Who are you, and how did you come here?"

* * * * *

The Irishman shrugged a trifle resentfully.

“The little maid’s in no danger,” he protested. “We’re seeking the common kindness of food and shelter; for the which we’ll gladly pay and get on our journey again.”

Without replying the man advanced, took the girl from her lofty perch and set her down. “Run in, the house, little daughter,” he commanded briefly.

But with a wail of rebellion she flung both short arms around the Irishman’s dusty boot. Foreseeing trouble for the young lady, he stooped and gently disengaged her.

“I’ve a little sister at home, colleen,” he said, “that’s the spit and image of yourself, save she’s the eyes like blue corn-flowers. Don’t you be crying, now. We’ll see each other again.”

As she still clung, her father stooped, lifted her and faced her about in the desired direction. “Go — in!” he commanded, with a gentle sternness that this time won obedience.

Boots looked at her regretfully, for he liked children. He was, indeed, to see her again, as he had promised; but not to know her — not though that recognition would have saved him terrible and bitter pain. But now she was to him only a small girl-child, who went at her father’s insistence, and going turned to wave a chubby and reluctant farewell.

Upon her disappearance the father’s manner relaxed.

“You took me by surprise,” he explained. “We are seldom favored with guests here, but I meant no inhospitality. You come from — —”

“The desert.” Boots’ brevity was indignant. Did the fellow think him a child-eating ogre that he snatched away his daughter so anxiously?

But Kennedy was more voluble. He plunged into an instant and piteous account of their recent sufferings, or, to speak more correctly, of his own, and before the tale was half finished, their unwilling host’s last trace of hostility seemed to have completely vanished.

“Come in — come in!” he ejaculated. “You shan’t tell me that sort of story standing out here. Come in and I’ll find you something or other worth eating, though I can’t promise what it will be. My people — —” He paused and seemed to hesitate rather strangely. “My servants are off for the day,” he at last concluded. “I’ll do my best, and ask you to put up with any lacks due to their absence.”

Both men offered willing though surprised assent.

“Off for the day!” thought Boots. “And where off to, I wonder? Does he give picnics to his peons? He’s a different master, then, to any I’ve met in this slave-driver’s country.”

Having seated them in a great, cool, high-ceilinged and galleried dining-room, their host disappeared to return presently bearing a piled trayful of plunder from his own deserted kitchen.

The food, which included chicken, the inevitable tortilla, sweet potatoes crystallised in sugar, bananas and other fruits, was as typically Mexican as the hacienda. Yet all signs failed if their host were of Spanish blood..

No Spanish-American speaks English as if it were quite native to his tongue, and moreover, though his eyes were dark, and his hair save where it was liberally shot with gray, almost black, there was something about his keen, clean-cut face which spoke of some more northern race. “You’re from the U.S.A.?” questioned Kennedy. The question was too blunt for courtesy, but the man nodded.

“Yes, I am an American. A Californian, though my parents were born on the Christiania Fiord.”

“Ah, a Norseman, is it?” Boots’ eyes lighted appreciatively. He had known a Norwegian or two, and thought them fine, upstanding, hard-hitting men of their hands. “I’m very glad to know you, Mr. — —”

“My name is Svend Biornson!” The tone was so challengingly abrupt that his guests involuntarily stared. If he had expected, however, to amuse another sort of surprise, he was disappointed. He saw it instantly and laughed as if to cover some odd embarrassment.

“Pardon my not presenting myself earlier. One forgets civilized forms in this, out-of-the-way place. And now I fancy you’d welcome a chance to wash and change to fresh garments. Will you follow me, gentlemen?”

* * * * *

The cool, airy chamber to which he escorted them opened off one of the two galleries surrounding the dining-room. Its three windows overlooked the patio, and through them one could step out upon another long, open gallery. There were two beds, draped with elaborate lace work, furniture of woven grass and wicker, and a bathroom with great, porous jars of cool water.

In his first glance about, Kennedy’s eye was caught by a thing that stood on a bracket over one of the beds. Without apology he lifted the object down and examined it curiously.

It was an image, some ten inches high, done in brilliantly polished but unglazed porcelain. The face, though flat, bore a peculiarly genial and benignant expression. On the head was a sort of miter, adorned with black spots. A tunic, on which embroidery was simulated in red, blue and gilt enamel; a golden collar, gaiters spotted like the headdress, and dead-black sandals completed the costume.

On the left arm a round shield was carried. The right hand grasped a stag, terminating at the top in the curved neck and head of a snake, springing out of a collar or circlet of feathers.

It was a very beautiful piece of potter’s art, but Kennedy had another reason for appreciation and interest.

“Quetzalcoatl, eh?” he said. “From Cholula, or did you find it around these parts?”

Biornson, who had not observed Kennedy’s act, whirled like a flash. To the amazement of both men, his face had gone dead white, as if at receiving some intolerable shock.

“Quetzalcoatl!” he ejaculated in a quivering voice. “Sir, what do you know of Quetzalcoatl?”

Kennedy stared back in blank astonishment.

“Why — this.” He held up the image. “I didn’t suppose that one of these existed, outside the museum at Mexico City. Don’t you know its value?”

Slowly the pallor vanished from Biornson’s countenance, and his nervous hands unclenched. With another of those queer, embarrassed laughs, he took the porcelain godling from Kennedy’s hands.

“I had forgot the thing was in here,” he muttered. “It belongs to my wife. She would be greatly annoyed if it were broken. Lucky piece, you understand. Superstition, of course, but no worse than throwing salt over your shoulder, or not walking under a ladder — all that kind of nonsense. I’ll put it in her room if you don’t mind. Got everything you want? Then I’ll leave you. Better sleep out the day — nothing like siesta — dinner whenever you desire to have it — —”

Still muttering detached phrases of hospitality, and with the image clutched firmly to his bosom, Biornson fairly escaped from the presence of his guests.

“What ails the poor man?” queried Boots. “Did they think we’d steal his china manikin, do you suppose?”

Kennedy scowled and shrugged.

“I suppose,” he retorted, “that this Biornson, if that’s his real name, is a rather queer sort, and that while we are in this house his eccentricities will bear watching.”

* * * * *

Weary though both were, they did not find it easy to fall asleep. There was something oppressive about this vast, silent hacienda. The mystery of its emptiness, the mystery of its very existence, combined with the odd manners of their host to fill their brains with riddles. They lay silent, uneasy, while outside the drowsy heat increased and even, the vociferous bird-life ceased its clamor.

Out of the silence, however, rest was born at last, and it was late in the afternoon when they woke.

“By the way, Mr. Kennedy,” Boots said, “if you’ll forgive changing the subject to something more recent, what was the bit of bric-a-brac that Biornson snatched out of your hand? Quetz — Quetz — what was the name of it?”

“Quetzalcoatl. A piece of old Aztec work. Down in Yucatan one can pick up all sorts of stone and terra-cotta images among the ruins, but not like that.”

“And this Quetz — what’s-his-name — who was he? One o’ the poor heathens idols, maybe?”

“The lord of the air. The fathered serpent.” Kennedy was generally willing to talk, when he could air some superior knowledge. “By tradition he was a man, a priest, who was afterward deified for his beneficent acts and character. It is said that he ruled Mexico in its Golden Age — Anahuac they called it then — and when he left his people he promised to return at the head of a race of men as white as himself.

“He was a white god, you must understand. For that reason, when the Spaniards first landed the natives believed the lost god’s promise had been kept. Images of him are common enough, but not in porcelain of that quality. Biornson surprised me into giving away its real value, like a fool, but at that I could pay him a good price for the thing and still make a profit. It would bring almost any sum from a New York collector.”

“Don’t deceive yourself that he didn’t know its value! You could see in his eye that he did.”

“What do you think of Biornson, anyway?”

“A fine, soft-spoken man — after the first minute.”

“Did you notice how he boggled over his name? Svend Biornson! I dare swear he has another, and one he has reason to conceal.”

But the other’s retort was cold and to the point.

“We Irish do hate an informer. Are you ready yet to go down?”

Save for a look of black resentment, Kennedy made no reply. However, as their briefest discussions generally ended in a clash, Boots ignored the glance and passed out to the dining-room gallery. There was yet no sound of life in the house, but on descending and finding their way out into the patio, they discovered Biornson there and he was not alone.

Seated on a stone bench by the fountain was a woman. She was a tall, slender person, of unusual beauty, and Boots thought her dark eyes and hair and peculiarly

roselike complexion reminiscent of the child who had first greeted them. She was dressed in a simple gown of some silky, leaf-green material, and as she talked with Biornson her hand fondled the long, soft ears of a white hound, whose head rested on her knee.

None of the three seemed at first aware of the guests' approach, but as they came nearer the woman's face lifted with a quick, startled attention. She sprang to her feet, and the dog, as if in imitation, reared up beside her. On its hind legs the brute stood nearly as tall as she; and an ominous rumble issued from its throat.

"Quiet!" cried Biornson sharply. He laid a hand on beast's neck, pushing it downward. "Gentlemen, I had hardly expected you to awaken so early."

He had grasped the hound by its silky white fur, for it wore no collar, and under that insecure hold the animal surged disobediently forward. Its eyes flamed in a menace more savage than the bared fangs beneath; and as the dog seemed about to spring, Biornson flung his arms about its neck. In a flash it turned and tried to reach his face with snapping jaws.

At that the woman, whose dark, startled eyes had been fixed on the strangers, seemed for the first time to become aware of her pet's misbehavior. She spoke to it in a murmur of soft, indistinguishable syllables, and the hound, which had so resented Biornson's interference, subsided instantly. A moment later it was flat on the ground at her feet.

"That's a fine dog," approved Boots, "and you've a finer command over him, madam. May I ask what breed he is?"

Before the woman could reply, Biornson intervened.

"Just a hound of the hills," he said quickly. "Astrid, these gentlemen are those of whom I told you." He presented them more formally and, as Boots had expected, introduced the lady as his wife.

The name "Astrid" had a Scandinavian sound, and her beauty might well be as Norse as her husband's ancestry, but they had little time to study her. After murmuring a few shy words of welcome, she excused herself and left the guests to Biornson's entertainment.

As her green-clad form, with the white hound pressing close beside, receded into the inner shadows, the eyes of one man followed with a gleam of interest not aroused by her beauty.

Her accent was the thing that troubled Archer Kennedy. That it was neither American, Norwegian, nor Spanish he was ready to take oath. Her appearance, too, had a vague hint of something different from any white woman he had ever seen. Yet surely no dark blood flowed in those pink-nailed hands, nor behind such rose-leaf cheeks.

Dismissing the problem as immaterial, he returned to his host.

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End of Sample