



Against that savage background of mountain and gorge she stood out clear-cut as a cameo, slender as a reed; wild, palpitating, beautiful. She was more than a picture. She was Life.

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THE COURAGE OF MARGE O'DOONE

CHAPTER I

If you had stood there in the edge of the bleak spruce forest, with the wind moaning dismally through the twisting trees—midnight of deep December—the Transcontinental would have looked like a thing of fire; dull fire, glowing with a smouldering warmth, but of strange ghostliness and out of place. It was a weird shadow, helpless and without motion, and black as the half-Arctic night save for the band of illumination that cut it in twain from the first coach to the last, with a space like an inky hyphen where the baggage car lay. Out of the North came armies of snow-laden clouds that scudded just above the earth, and with these clouds came now and then a shrieking mockery of wind to taunt this stricken creation of man and the creatures it sheltered—men and women who had begun to shiver, and whose tense white faces stared with increasing anxiety into the mysterious darkness of the night that hung like a sable curtain ten feet from the car windows.

For three hours those faces had peered out into the night. Many of the prisoners in the snowbound coaches had enjoyed the experience somewhat at first, for there is [Pg 4] pleasing and indefinable thrill to unexpected adventure, and this, for a brief spell, had been adventure de luxe. There had been warmth and light, men's laughter, women's voices, and children's play. But the loudest jester among the men was now silent, huddled deep in his great coat; and the young woman who had clapped her hands in silly ecstasy when it was announced that the train was snowbound was weeping and shivering by turns. It was cold—so cold that the snow which came sweeping and swirling with the wind was like granite-dust; it *clicked, clicked, clicked* against the glass—a bombardment of untold billions of infinitesimal projectiles fighting to break in. In the edge of the forest it was probably forty degrees below zero. Within the coaches there still remained some little warmth. The burning lamps radiated it and the presence of many people added to it. But it was cold, and growing colder. A gray coating of congealed breath covered the car windows. A few men had given their outer coats to

women and children. These men looked most frequently at their watches. The adventure de luxe was becoming serious.

For the twentieth time a passing train-man was asked the same question.

"The good Lord only knows," he growled down into the face of the young woman whose prettiness would have enticed the most chivalrous attention from him earlier in the evening. "Engine and tender been gone three hours and the divisional point only twenty miles up the line. Should have been back with help long ago. Hell, ain't it?"

The young woman did not reply, but her round mouth [Pg 5] formed a quick and silent approbation of his final remark.

"Three hours!" the train-man continued his growling as he went on with his lantern. "That's the hell o' railroading it along the edge of the Arctic. When you git snowed in you're *snowed in*, an' there ain't no two ways about it!"

He paused at the smoking compartment, thrust in his head for a moment, passed on and slammed the door of the car after him as he went into the next coach.

In that smoking compartment there were two men, facing each other across the narrow space between the two seats. They had not looked up when the train-man thrust in his head. They seemed, as one leaned over toward the other, wholly oblivious of the storm.

It was the older man who bent forward. He was about fifty. The hand that rested for a moment on David Raine's knee was red and knotted. It was the hand of a man who had lived his life in struggling with the wilderness. And the face, too, was of such a man; a face coloured and toughened by the tannin of wind and blizzard and hot northern sun, with eyes cobwebbed about by a myriad of fine lines that spoke of years spent under the strain of those things. He was not a large man. He was shorter than David Raine. There was a slight droop to his shoulders. Yet about him there was a strength, a suppressed energy ready to act, a zestful eagerness for life and its daily mysteries which the other and younger man did not possess. Throughout many thousands of square miles of the

great northern wilderness this older man was known as Father Roland, the Missioner. [Pg 6]

His companion was not more than thirty-eight. Perhaps he was a year or two younger. It may be that the wailing of the wind outside, the strange voices that were in it and the chilling gloom of their little compartment made of him a more striking contrast to Father Roland than he would have been under other conditions. His eyes were a clear and steady gray as they met Father Roland's. They were eyes that one could not easily forget. Except for his eyes he was like a man who had been sick, and was still sick. The Missioner had made his own guess. And now, with his hand on the other's knee, he said:

"And you say – that you are afraid – for this friend of yours?"

David Raine nodded his head. Lines deepened a little about his mouth.

"Yes, I am afraid." For a moment he turned to the night. A fiercer volley of the little snow demons beat against the window, as though his pale face just beyond their reach stirred them to greater fury. "I have a most disturbing inclination to worry about him," he added, and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

He faced Father Roland again.

"Did you ever hear of a man losing himself?" he asked. "I don't mean in the woods, or in a desert, or by going mad. I mean in the other way – heart, body, soul; losing one's grip, you might call it, until there was no earth to stand on. Did you?"

"Yes – many years ago – I knew of a man who lost himself in that way," replied the Missioner, straightening in his seat. "But he found himself again. And this [Pg 7] friend of yours? I am interested. This is the first time in three years that I have been down to the edge of civilization, and what you have to tell will be different – vastly different from what I know. If you are betraying nothing would you mind telling me his story?"

"It is not a pleasant story," warned the younger man, "and on such a night as this – –"

"It may be that one can see more clearly into the depths of misfortune and tragedy," interrupted the Missioner quietly.

A faint flush rose into David Raine's pale face. There was something of nervous eagerness in the clasp of his fingers upon his knees.

"Of course, there is the woman," he said.

"Yes—of course—the woman."

"Sometimes I haven't been quite sure whether this man worshipped the woman or the woman's beauty," David went on, with a strange glow in his eyes. "He loved beauty. And this woman was beautiful, almost too beautiful for the good of one's soul, I guess. And he must have loved her, for when she went out of his life it was as if he had sunk into a black pit out of which he could never rise. I have asked myself often if he would have loved her if she had been less beautiful—even quite plain, and I have answered myself as he answered that question, in the affirmative. It was born in him to worship wherever he loved at all. Her beauty made a certain sort of completeness for him. He treasured that. He was proud of it. He counted himself the richest man in the world because he possessed it. But deep under his worship of her beauty he loved *her*. I am more and more sure of [Pg 8] that, and I am equally sure that time will prove it—that he will never rise again with his old hope and faith out of that black pit into which he sank when he came face to face with the realization that there were forces in life—in nature perhaps, more potent than his love and his own strong will."

Father Roland nodded.

"I understand," he said, and he sank back farther in his corner by the window, so that his face was shrouded a little in shadow. "This other man loved a woman, too. And she was beautiful. He thought she was the most beautiful thing in the world. It is great love that makes beauty."

"But this woman—my friend's wife—was so beautiful that even the eyes of other women were fascinated by her. I have seen her when it seemed she must have come fresh from the hands of angels; and at first, when my friend was the happiest man in the world, he was fond of telling her that it must have been the angels who put

the colour in her face and the wonderful golden fires in her shining hair. It wasn't his love for her that made her beautiful. She *was* beautiful."

"And her soul?" softly questioned the shadowed lips of the Missioner.

The other's hand tightened slowly.

"In making her the angels forgot a soul, I guess," he said.

"Then your friend did not love her." The Little Missioner's voice was quick and decisive. "There can be no love where there is no soul."

"That is impossible. He did love her. I know it."

"I still disagree with you. Without knowing your [Pg 9] friend, I say that he worshipped her beauty. There were others who worshipped that same loveliness—others who did not possess her, and who would have bartered their souls for her had they possessed souls to barter. Is that not true?"

"Yes, there were others. But to understand you must have known my friend before he sank down into the pit—when he was still a man. He was a great student. His fortune was sufficient to give him both time and means for the pursuits he loved. He had his great library, and adjoining it a laboratory. He wrote books which few people read because they were filled with facts and odd theories. He believed that the world was very old, and that there was less profit for men in discovering new luxuries for an artificial civilization than in re-discovering a few of the great laws and miracles buried in the dust of the past. He believed that the nearer we get to the beginning of things, and not the farther we drift, the clearer comprehension can we have of earth and sky and God, and the meaning of it all. He did not consider it an argument for progress that Christ and His disciples knew nothing of the telephone, of giant engines run by steam, of electricity, or of instruments by which man could send messages for thousands of miles through space. His theory was that the patriarchs of old held a closer touch on the pulse of Life than progress in its present forms will ever bring to us. He was not a fanatic. He was not a crank. He was young, and filled with enthusiasm. He loved children. He wanted to fill his home

with them. But his wife knew that she was too beautiful for that—and they had none." [Pg 10]

He had leaned a little forward, and had pulled his hat a trifle over his eyes. There was a moment's lull in the storm, and it was so quiet that each could hear the ticking of Father Roland's big silver watch.

Then he said:

"I don't know why I tell you all this, Father, unless it is to relieve my own mind. There can be no hope that it will benefit my friend. And yet it cannot harm him. It seems very near to sacrilege to put into words what I am going to say about—his wife. Perhaps there were extenuating conditions for her. I have tried to convince myself of that, just as he tried to believe it. It may be that a man who is born into this age must consider himself a misfit unless he can tune himself in sympathy with its manner of life. He cannot be too critical, I guess. If he is to exist in a certain social order of our civilization unburdened by great doubts and deep glooms he must not shiver when his wife tinkles her champagne glass against another. He must learn to appreciate the sinuous beauties of the cabaret dancer, and must train himself to take no offence when he sees shimmering wines tilted down white throats. He must train himself to many things, just as he trains himself to classical music and grand opera. To do these things he must forget, as much as he can, the sweet melodies and the sweeter women who are sinking into oblivion together. He must accept life as a Grand Piano tuned by a new sort of Tuning Master, and unless he can dance to its music he is a misfit. That is what my friend said to extenuate *her*. She fitted into this kind of life splendidly. He was in the other groove. She loved light, laughter, wine, song, [Pg 11] and excitement. He, the misfit, loved his books, his work, and his home. His greatest joy would have been to go with her, hand in hand, through some wonderful cathedral, pointing out its ancient glories and mysteries to her. He wanted aloneness—just they two. Such was his idea of love. And she—wanted other things. You understand, Father?... The thing grew, and at last he saw that she was getting away from him. Her passion for admiration and excitement became a madness. I know, because I saw it. My friend said that it was madness, even as he was going mad. And yet he did not suspect her. If another had told him

that she was unclean I am sure he would have killed him. Slowly he came to experience the agony of knowing that the woman whom he worshipped did not love him. But this did not lead him to believe that she could love another—or others. Then, one day, he left the city. She went with him to the train—his wife. She saw him go. She waved her handkerchief at him. And as she stood there she was—glorious."

Through partly closed eyes the Little Missioner saw his shoulders tighten, and a hardness settle about his mouth. The voice, too, was changed when it went on. It was almost emotionless.

"It's sometimes curious how the Chief Arbiter of things plays His tricks on men—and women, isn't it, Father? There was trouble on the line ahead, and my friend came back. It was unexpected. It was late when he reached home, and with his night key he went in quietly, because he did not want to awaken *her*. It was very still in the house—until he came to the door of her room. There [Pg 12] was a light. He heard voices—very low. He listened. He went in."

There was a terrible silence. The ticking of Father Roland's big silver watch seemed like the beating of a tiny drum.

"And what happened then, David?"

"My friend went in," repeated David. His eyes sought Father Roland's squarely, and he saw the question there. "No, he did not kill them," he said. "He doesn't know what kept him from killing—the man. He was a coward, that man. He crawled away like a worm. Perhaps that was why my friend spared him. The wonderful part of it was that the woman—his wife—was not afraid. She stood up in her ravishing dishevelment, with that mantle of gold he had worshipped streaming about her to her knees, *and she laughed?* Yes, she laughed—a mad sort of laugh; a laughter of fear, perhaps—but—*laughter*. So he did not kill them. Her laughter—the man's cowardice—saved them. He turned. He closed the door. He left them. He went out into the night."

He paused, as though his story was finished.

"And that is—the end?" asked Father Roland softly.

"Of his dreams, his hopes, his joy in life—yes, that was the end."

"But of your friend's story? What happened after that?"

"A miracle, I think," replied David hesitatingly, as though he could not quite understand what had happened after that. "You see, this friend of mine was not of the vacillating and irresolute sort. I had always given him credit for that—credit for being a man who would measure [Pg 13] up to a situation. He was quite an athlete, and enjoyed boxing and fencing and swimming. If at any time in his life he could have conceived of a situation such as he encountered in his wife's room, he would have lived in a moral certainty of killing the man. And when the situation did come was it not a miracle that he should walk out into the night leaving them not only unharmed, but together? I ask you, Father—was it not a miracle?"

Father Roland's eyes were gleaming strangely under the shadow of his broad-brimmed black hat. He merely nodded.

"Of course," resumed David, "it may be that he was too stunned to act. I believe that the laughter—*her* laughter—acted upon him like a powerful drug. Instead of plunging him into the passion of a murderous desire for vengeance it curiously enough anesthetized his emotions. For hours he heard that laughter. I believe he will never forget it. He wandered the streets all that night. It was in New York, and of course he passed many people. But he did not see them. When morning came he was on Fifth Avenue many miles from his home. He wandered downtown in a constantly growing human stream whose noise and bustle and many-keyed voice acted on him as a tonic. For the first time he asked himself what he would do. Stronger and stronger grew the desire in him to return, to face again that situation in his home. I believe that he would have done this—I believe that the red blood in him would have meted out its own punishment had he not turned just in time, and at the right place. He found himself in front of The Little Church Around the Corner, nestling in its hiding-place [Pg 14] just off the Avenue. He remembered its restful quiet, the coolness of its aisles and alcoves. He was exhausted, and he went in. He sat down facing the chancel, and as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom he saw that the broad, low dais in front of the organ was banked with great masses of hydrangeas. There had been a wedding, probably the evening before. My friend told me of the thickening that came in his throat,

of the strange, terrible throb in his heart as he sat there alone—the only soul in the church—and stared at those hydrangeas. Hydrangeas had been their own wedding flower, Father. And then — —"

For the first time there was something like a break in the younger man's voice.

"My friend thought he was alone," he went on. "But some one had come out like a shadow beyond the chancel railing, and of a sudden, beginning wonderfully low and sweet, the great organ began to fill the church with its melody. The organist, too, thought he was alone. He was a little, old man, his shoulders thin and drooped, his hair white. But in his soul there must have been a great love and a great peace. He played something low and sweet. When he had finished he rose and went away as quietly as he had come, and for a long time after that my friend sat there — alone. Something new was born in him, something which I hope will grow and comfort him in the years to come. When he went out into the city again the sun was shining. He did not go home. He did not see the woman — his wife — again. He has never seen her since that night when she stood up in her dishevelled beauty and *laughed* at him. Even the divorce [Pg 15] proceedings did not bring them together. I believe that he treated her fairly. Through his attorneys he turned over to her a half of what he possessed. Then he went away. That was a year ago. In that year I know that he has fought desperately to bring himself back into his old health of mind and body, and I am quite sure that he has failed."

He paused, his story finished. He drew the brim of his hat lower over his eyes, and then he rose to his feet. His build was slim and clean-cut. He was perhaps five feet ten inches in height, which was four inches taller than the Little Missioner. His shoulders were of good breadth, his waist and hips of an athletic slimness. But his clothes hung with a certain looseness. His hands were unnaturally thin, and in his face still hovered the shadows of sickness and of mental suffering.

Father Roland stood beside him now with eyes that shone with a deep understanding. Under the sputter of the lamp above their heads the two men clasped hands, and the Little Missioner's grip was like the grip of iron.

"David, I've preached a strange code through the wilderness for many a long year," he said, and his voice was vibrant with a strong emotion. "I'm not Catholic and I'm not Church of England. I've got no religion that wears a name. I'm simply Father Roland, and all these years I've helped to bury the dead in the forest, an' nurse the sick, an' marry the living, an' it may be that I've learned one thing better than most of you who live down in civilization. And that's how to find yourself when you're down an' out. Boy, will you come with me?" [Pg 16]

Their eyes met. A fiercer gust of the storm beat against the windows. They could hear the wind wailing in the trees outside.

"It was your story that you told me," said Father Roland, his voice barely above a whisper. "She was your wife, David?"

It was very still for a few moments. Then came the reply: "Yes, she was my wife...."

Suddenly David freed his hand from the Little Missioner's clasp. He had stopped something that was almost like a cry on his lips. He pulled his hat still lower over his eyes and went through the door out into the main part of the coach.

Father Roland did not follow. Some of the ruddiness had gone from his cheeks, and as he stood facing the door through which David had disappeared a smouldering fire began to burn far back in his eyes. After a few moments this fire died out, and his face was gray and haggard as he sat down again in his corner. His hands unclenched. With a great sigh his head drooped forward on his chest, and for a long time he sat thus, his eyes and face lost in shadow. One would not have known that he was breathing.

[Pg 17]

CHAPTER II

Half a dozen times that night David had walked from end to end of the five snowbound coaches that made up the Transcontinental. He believed that for him it was an act of Providence that had delayed the train. Otherwise a sleeping car would have been picked up at the next divisional point, and he would not have unburdened himself to Father Roland. They would not have sat up until that late