

The RED LAMP



By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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July 9.

I made an excuse this morning to Annie Cochran, and she slipped me up the kitchen staircase of the other house and so to the attic. The lamp was as I had left it and the closet locked, and today I am asking myself whether, with that curious lack of perspective one finds at night, I did not see instead of the lamp far away, the lighted end of a cigar close at hand.

Annie's report on my tenants is satisfactory on the whole. She doesn't much care for the secretary, but the old man's "bark" is worse than his bite. He comes down in the morning, or is helped down, to his breakfast and she cuts his food for him—he seems to dislike the boy's doing it—reads the paper and then goes to work.

"To work?" I asked. "What sort of work?" "He's writing a book."

But it appears that he is writing it only in the nonliteral sense. He is dictating a book. And it also appears he has chosen this place because of its isolation, and Annie's orders are that he receives no visitors.

But it also appears that young Gordon is perhaps not as courageous as he made out to me when he came to look over the house, and that he has been "hearing things."

"What sort of things?" "He didn't say. But he asked me this morning if I'd been in the house last night. 'If you find me here at night, it'll be because I'm paralyzed and can't move,' I said, 'and if you take my advice, you'll not go round hunting if you hear anything.'"

"That must have cheered him considerably."

"I don't know about that. He just looked at me and said, 'What's the game, anyhow? I'll bet a dollar you're in on it.'"

Edith has sprung a surprise on us all. I have noticed for a day or two that she has been taking a keen interest in the mail; yet Edith's mail, with Halliday here, is largely a matter of delicate paper and the large square handwriting of the modern young woman, and has dealt this summer largely with reports on horse parties, summer resorts, and various young men who seem recognizable to her under such cognomens as Chick, Bud and Curley.

This morning, however, her mail included a business-like envelope, and she flung the white, rose and mauve heap aside and pounced on it. A moment later she got up and coming around the table to me, gravely kissed that portion of my head which is gradually emerging, like a shore on an ebb tide, from my hair.

"As one literary artist to another," she said, "I salute you." And placed before me a check for twenty dollars. She has written a feature article on our sheep-killing and has sold it.

"And it took me only two hours," she says triumphantly. After that she was rather silent, computing, I dare say, how much she can earn, giving four hours a day to it for six days a week. At the rate, then, of ten thousand a year!

"Considerably more than I receive, Edith," I said gravely, and I saw I had been right by the way she started.

She set off at once for the boat-house, but came back later considerably crestfallen, and poured out her troubles to me.

"If he had anything he would give it to me," she wailed. "If I can write and make money—"

"You can't fight the masculine instinct, my dear, to support its woman; not be kept by her. Besides, have you considered this? You will not always find subjects as salable as this one has been."

"Subjects!" she said scornfully. "Why, this place is full of them."

The result of which has been on my part all day an uneasy apprehension as to what she will choose next. Nor am I made easier by a question she asked me just before dinner.

"What became of the Riggs woman?" she asked. "Do you suppose she's still around here?"

"I imagine not. Why?"

"I just wondered," she said, and wandered to that particular corner of the veranda from which she has a distant but apparently satisfactory view of the boat-house.

Perhaps Halliday is right. (Note: In his suggestion that Jane and I take the sloop and go down the coast for a few days.) If any sheep are killed in my absence or anything more serious should happen, it will serve to rout Greenough's absurd determination to involve me, and provide a complete alibi. At the same time, it will be rest and recreation for Jane, and it may put me in a better frame of mind.

Peter Geiss, he thinks, would go with us as captain and bunk under a pup tent, leaving the cabin to Jane and myself.

(On board the sloop) July 10.

Amazing, the celerity with which youth thinks and acts. Tonight Jane and I—and Peter Geiss—are rolling gently to our anchor in Bass cove, close enough in to be quiet and far enough out to escape the mosquitos. And yet only yesterday the plan was an amorphous thing, floating in the air between Halliday and myself, a mere ghost of an idea, without material substance.

The sloop is tidy. Is even fairly seaworthy. Her bottom has today been scrubbed with a broom, and her sails, slightly mildewed, still present from a distance a certain impressiveness.

"What," I shout at Peter Geiss, "is that small sail in front? Forward, I mean."

"How's that?"

"The sail there, what's its name?"

I say, pointing. "Name?"

"I'll say it's a shame," he says.

"Canvas on this boat cost the old gentleman a lot of money."

By and by, however, I learn the jib and the flying jib.

We have a small cabin, with four bunks in it, and two of these are now neatly and geometrically made up, ready for the night. In Jane's small closet there is food of all sorts, neat rows of tins and wax-paper packages. If we are washed out to sea we can

I imagine, live indefinitely on deviled ham, sardines and cheese. And I have always my fishing line.

Ah! a tug at it!

July 11.

My worries are dropping from me. Helena Lear is with Edith, and no doubt Halliday is camped on their doorstep, as vigilant as a watch dog, and certainly more dependable than Jock. I can see, too, with better perspective how absurd my anxiety has been as to Greenough. It is his business to believe every man guilty until he has proved himself innocent. And am I not now in the act of proving my innocence?

But my problem remains. And trying to solve it is like playing solitaire with a card missing. I have, we will say, lost the knave of clubs out of my pack, and without it the game cannot go on.

Halliday, I know, believes that there is a possible connection between the killer and Uncle Horace's letter. He believes, in other words, that some curious and perhaps monstrous idea lies behind the sheep-killing, and that it may be the same idea to which the

letter refers.

"There is something behind it," he asserts. "Something so vital to the man who believes it that he is ready to kill—has killed certainly once and possibly twice—to protect it."

But the nature of the idea, or conviction, he nobly evades.

"And this monstrous idea was to kill sheep, and build a stone altar?"

"How do we know that isn't merely a propitiatory sacrifice, Skipper? A sort of preliminary to the real thing?"

"And what is to be the real thing?" "What is the wickedest crime you can name, against society?"

"The taking of human life."

"Exactly."

But this, as he says, is as far as he goes. He is, however, careful to say that his theory has got him somewhere; that is, that there is a definite idea behind what has been happening.

"An insane one, then."

"Not necessarily," he objects. "Your Uncle Horace didn't write that letter to a man he considered insane."

Peter Geiss has his own theory about poor Carroway's death. Carroway, he says, probably located the

boat; he could do that by cutting off his engine and listening for the oars. Then, in black darkness, he steered toward it, probably with the idea of driving the fellow back. But Peter does not think that Carroway would have closed in on the murderer, unarmed as he was.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

"Why does Simpkins always keep referring to his 'late wife'? He isn't a widower, is he?" "No, his wife is still alive—but she is never on time."—The Pathfinder

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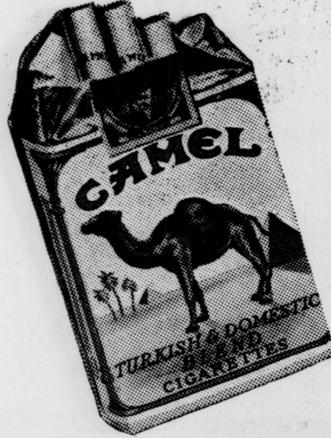
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