

DEVIL-MAY-CARE

by ARTHUR SOMERS ROGHE
ILLUSTRATED BY DONALD RILEY

Ninth Instalment

What Happened Before

At a party in Palm Beach given by Mr. Cooper Clay, Leson, an attorney, meets Lucy Harkness, known as Devil-May-Care because of her adventurous, eventful life. In a game in which partners for the evening are chosen, Lucy is won by Tim Stevens, who has a great reputation as a successful heart-breaker. Leson is a bit jealous. Tim Stevens tells Lucy they are going aboard his boat, the *Minerva*, and she accedes in order not to be a quitter. Asked if she is sorry that she won her company, Lucy says she is not and that evidently Fate has arranged it. The champagne tells her to stop looking regretfully after Leson. Aboard Stevens' boat, the *Minerva*, Stevens tells Lucy of his love. When she replies with contempt for him, he grows violently angry and she becomes afraid of him. He says he will never let her go from the *Minerva* until she accepts him. To escape him, she leaps into the water from her cabin window, swimming a short distance under water.

Lucy reaches land and meets Dr. Fergus Faunce on an island. He takes care of her and takes her home. Everyone is worried about her, and when she meets Stevens he is frantic, regretful and still ardent in protestations of love.

Leson informs Lucy that Stevens must raise a quarter of a million dollars or go to jail—at five o'clock. Lucy goes to her bank and raises the sum.

Lucy goes to Stevens to help him, but he refuses to take money from a woman to whom he is not married. So Lucy marries this man that she hates, and promptly runs away from him, going to her staunch friend Dr. Fergus Faunce to tell what she has done.

Stevens sets out in search of Lucy. Meanwhile, Dr. Faunce and Lucy launch the *Minerva* boat. A hurricane wrecks them on their first trip. Lucy is saved, and finds herself aboard the *Minerva*, wondering what happened to Dr. Faunce.

Dr. Faunce is aboard the *Minerva* also. Stevens threatens to kill Faunce unless Lucy sticks to him. To save Faunce she accedes, but expresses hate for Stevens. A few minutes later he startles her by saying he doesn't want her, and never will.

Leson sees Lucy and in a burst of confidence tells her of a plot against her husband. Certain interests are to break down the bridges on his property, and make it worthless. She goes to Faunce's place, where her husband and Faunce are together, and tells of the plot. Preparations are made for a fight.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Faunce dived into his cabin; he returned carrying a double-barreled shotgun. And now Lucy noted a bulge in her husband's hip pocket; a delightful anticipatory shudder ran up and down her spine. This promised excitement. Well, she'd always thrived on it.

Over his shoulder, dog-trotting toward the waterway, Stevens called back to his two followers:

"They've probably blocked the roads leading down to the development, and we'd never get through the guard."

"If we sneak up in your rowboat, Fergus, old kid, we'll beat 'em to the punch."

What, thought Lucy, had inspired, or caused, or aroused this apparent intimacy between Tim and Fergus? Was it money, the surest bond of all? Did Fergus accept Tim because he hoped to be made wealthy? But that didn't seem like Fergus. . . .

Tim ceased rowing. Ahead could be heard the confused murmur of many voices.

"They're on the first bridge," whispered Tim.

"Then we're too late," she groaned. She heard an inarticulate ejaculation from her husband. Then:

"Thought you wanted to see a fair fight, Lucy. Well, be patient." He leaned toward Faunce, yet in the calm night she heard his words.

"If I can keep one bridge standing, I'm all right," he said. "So . . . we'll throw 'em off this first one. All set? Aw-right!"

He dug his oars into the water, and the skiff shot around a bend; it was beneath a bridge before the men on it realized what was in their midst. Stevens stood up; his big hands gripped a bridge timber and he had climbed, like any huge cat, upon the bridge itself. She heard his great booming voice:

"Welcome, friends! Didn't expect you or you'd have had a better reception. But, surprised as we are, we'll do the best we can. Do you prefer to be pushed off this bridge or thrown off? We aim to please."

The skiff had drifted under the bridge, and now Faunce was standing up, gripping at the timbers above. She would not be left alone; rising, she stepped the length of the boat, and placed her fingers upon the planking of the bridge. She was standing by her husband just as a voice cried:

"Knock him over; he's all alone."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," commented Faunce. His shot-gun was slung across one arm.

From the shore of the stream another voice called:

"Three of them. Well, there are twenty of us."

Tiger-like, her husband moved. There was a stifled cry, a choking protest, something whirled through the air, and a splash from the stream.

"Only nineteen now," his great voice boomed. "Who's next for the bath?"

There were four men upon the bridge, but as he moved closer, they shrank back.

"Wait a minute," cried a third voice. "I'm the sheriff of this county, and I came here to see that law and order is observed. These people expected trouble and called on me for aid. These men are all my deputies and I order you to cease resisting their lawful occupation and consider yourself under arrest."

"No one could put it more beauti-

fully," laughed Stevens. "Getting a nice fat bribe, sheriff?"

"By God! don't you hint at me going anything crooked!" cried the sheriff.

"Was I hinting? Didn't mean to. Let me state it again. I accuse you of being bribed. You're a nasty fat crook, and if you don't take your men to hell off my property I'll kill a few of you. Do you get me?"

The humor had died from his voice; it was menacing, ugly, fraught with deadly intent.

"Look here, Stevens. This is Clem

one of them. As fighting animals . . .

They returned to the bridge.

"This midnight stuff is my justification," Stevens was saying. "But when they come back in daylight, with a proper warrant for my arrest, I sha'n't have the excuse that I didn't believe Maddox was the sheriff. Fergus, we must have an injunction by morning. Now, Judge Learning is in Palm Beach. He has jurisdiction over this territory. He's at El Verano Hotel. Wake him out of bed, get him to issue an injunction against Clary, against the sheriff, against the town officials,



Stevens's answer was not made in words but in actions. He leaped forward; his big fist thudded on the jaw of one of the men on the bridge.

Clary speaking." The copper magnate stood upon the bank, close to where the man hurled into the stream had clattered soggily ashore.

"Well, speak," said Stevens.

"The law's with us, Stevens," said Clary. "Better give in, or we'll rush you."

Stevens's answer was not made in words but in actions. He leaped forward; his big fist thudded on the jaw of one of the men on the bridge. The man went down, rolled over, and fell into the water. The skirmish ended there. The other three fled. Stevens pursued to the end of the bridge.

With Faunce at his elbow, he addressed Clary.

"I'm armed; so is Dr. Faunce. If one man puts his foot on this bridge we'll shoot to kill. Got it?"

"You're under arrest!" bawled the sheriff.

Stevens laughed.

"All right; come take me."

The sheriff moved toward the bridge, but stopped ten feet away.

"Go on, Maddox!" cried Clary. "Going to let him bluff you out of it?"

"The only way to find out if a man's bluffing is to call him," said Stevens, sweetly. "My chips are right in the center of the table. Who calls?"

"Resisting arrest, breach of the peace."

Stevens cut short the sheriff's cries.

"I haven't resisted arrest, Maddox. In fact, I've invited you to come over here and arrest me. But you're such a shy little crook—" his voice suddenly broke in rage: "Maddox you're yellow! Your parents ran away from the Confederate Army and came down to the Florida swamps and spawned like the vermin they were. You'd lynch a nigger when you're a hundred to one, but one bandit laughs at a thousand like you. You shoot in the back and never face to face. You want to arrest me. Well, here I am."

He paused and turned to Lucy.

"Sorry; promised you a real fight, but it takes two to make one."

"You'll regret this, Stevens," said Clary.

"Not half so much as you're regretting it right now," retorted Stevens. "But you're not going to pull down this bridge this night, old man. Nor any other night. You may buy a sheriff or a marshal, but a judge is something else again, old top. And say, I'm getting tired of all this. The land you're on is my property, just as this bridge is. Get off it."

"Don't overplay your hand, Stevens," advised Clary.

"No? Much obliged for the advice. But when I gamble I bet all I have. Now I'm betting that there isn't a man in your gang that has the real sand of a rat. . . . Fergus, let's clean 'em out. Shoot the first man that hesitates."

Lucy had read of men dominating a mob, frightening them, but this was no mob that Stevens and Fergus over-awed. These were obviously hired bullies, and among them was an officer of the law. Yet as Tim and Fergus advanced upon them the superior numbers retreated. Even old Clary, who stood ground until the last, suddenly turned and ran. What had promised great excitement, even tragedy, degenerated into farce, into burlesque.

And yet it had not been Tim's fault. The way he had tossed a man into the water, knocked another off the bridge. . . . And Fergus had shown gallantry. These were two magnificent men, no matter what else might be said about

against everybody, ordering them to restrain from destroying these bridges. We've saved the others, you'll notice. They're afraid we mean business and will start shooting. Come back here. Round up a few people to make it look better. They might buck an injunction, you know."

He whistled gustily.

"Slip into the skiff; you'll have to wade or swim for it; see it down there, against the bank? Row back to Mango Key, hop into your car, and make your get-away. Of course they may be laying for you on the way, but show them the old shot-gun."

"We'll hope you make it."

"Why couldn't I go, leaving you two to handle them if they decide to try again, if they summon up courage enough," suggested Lucy.

Stevens frowned.

"They won't rush us, but they might try a surprise—block the way for a car, and when you stopped jump you. I don't like the idea of my wife in the hands of that gang."

"Mr. Clary wouldn't let them actually harm me," said Lucy. "He's a wicked old devil, but after all, I'm a friend of his wife."

"She's right, Tim," said Fergus. "I ought to stay here with you."

"How in blazes is she going to find her way back to Mango Key?" objected Stevens.

"I can row a boat," said Lucy, "and when I reach the mouth of the creek I simply turn north, to the left, and when the waterway narrows I'm opposite Mango Key. The moon's gone, but the stars give enough light. Of course I can do it, if you'll get the boat for me. I hate to be all muddy."

"She's right, Tim," said Faunce, again.

Stevens shrugged, then yielded. He fetched the boat, placing the oars carefully in Lucy's hands, and shoved her off.

"I think I owe you a lot of thanks," he whispered. "You certainly saved my bacon."

"You owe me nothing," she replied. "I owed whatever I did to you."

"How do you figure that?" he inquired.

"Because I believed you were engaged in a swindle. It seems that you were not. One should make payment for unjust thoughts. I've tried to pay."

"This time, then, I'm not a thief?" he said.

"This time you're not," she said. "Much obliged," he said dryly.

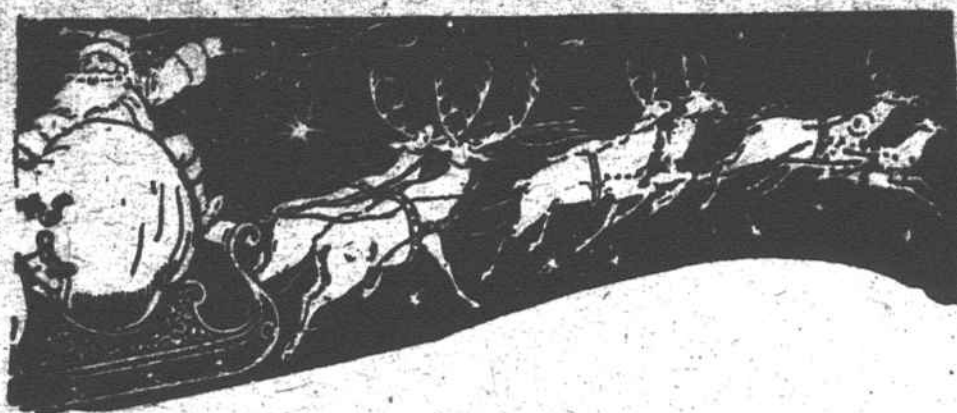
His body bent and the skiff went whirling out into the middle of the narrow stream; she bent to the oars.

Judge Learning descended to the lobby of El Verano and heard Lucy's impassioned statement of the case. The judge, no cracker, but a Southern gentleman, smiled sleepily at the pretty girl.

"Any man that's wise enough to pick you for a wife, Mrs. Stevens, is bound to get an even break in anything, because he's no fool. And he'll get a fair break with this court. You go home and get some sleep and I'll attend to the rest of the matter."

She could trust him, and so she went home, wild though she was to return to Seminole Creek and learn how Tim and Fergus were getting on, an afterthought—were getting on.

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