



# The BLUE CIRCLE

BY Elizabeth Jordan

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WNU Service.  
**Chapter VI**  
—11—  
Tea for Three.

It seemed to Renshaw that he had been waiting in Peacock alley since the beginning of time. In reality he had been there less than half an hour when he heard his name uttered in a cool tone that was becoming familiar to his ears.

"Why, there's Mr. Renshaw—and he appears to be asleep!"

He sprang to his feet, snatching off his hat as he did so. Verity Campbell and Madame Hvoeslef had stopped before him. For a moment the wave of humiliation that rolled over him shut out any appreciation of their expressions or their manner. They must be half frantic. They must despise him beyond words as a blundering ass—incapable even of carrying out the simplest instructions. Well, nothing they or anyone else thought of him could be worse than what he thought of himself.

"No," he said confusedly, "I wasn't asleep. I was trying to—." He broke off and turned directly to Madame Hvoeslef. "I'm wretched about this thing," he said, with an actual break in his voice. "What can I say?"

The eyes of both women were on him as he spoke, and now, with time for clearing senses, he realized that neither pair held the expression he had looked for. The eyes of Verity revealed her customary indifference, very slightly tinged with criticism. Those of the other woman, cold at first, were softening into pity as they took in the young man's haggard aspect.

"Say nothing more, Monsieur. I am distressed that you have suffered over my affairs." She was smiling as she spoke, and the smile prepared him for her next words. "Everything is—how is it said in English?—quite all right."

Renshaw's eyes sent her a flash that reminded both women of a sudden blaze from a lighthouse with the lifting of a fog. It was an exhibition of hidden possibilities that startled them. Under it the older woman's expression warmed still more, and the tones of her throaty voice took on a quality they had never held for him before.

"You have been unhappy," she said. "I am so sorry!" She took a step nearer to him as she spoke, under an impulse to put a comforting hand on his arm. But his glance had dropped, and her half-raised hand dropped, too. "We, also, have been anxious," she went on gently, "but that is past. The case is safe in the vaults of the Trust company. I myself have just left it there. And this time—her smile extended now to her brilliant eyes—"Mr. Atkins and I have both opened it to be sure it held what we thought."

Her hearer was in a state of stupefaction shot through with indescribable relief.

"But—I don't understand," he stammered.

"We ourselves do not understand. I can tell you only what has happened. When Mr. Atkins telephoned, we were riding. Hart came for us in the car, I was—." she stopped as if almost overcome by the memory of what that moment had been—"I was in despair," she went on quickly. "I rushed to my room to change for the train. And there, on my bed, was my leather case—and in it, quite safe, when I unlocked it, was—what I had put there."

"Then—you mean—you had two cases? You gave me the wrong one?"

He was trying to follow her, but something seemed wrong with his mind. She shook her head.

"No; and that is what we do not comprehend. I had one case only, the original case, made for me in—." she stopped—"in Europe," she ended abruptly. "Some one else has made another case exactly like it. We can understand why this was done. But why the original case and its contents were returned to me, after the trouble and expense of duplicating it—that, Monsieur, we cannot follow at all."

Renshaw at last took in the two points that were important.

"Then your property is safe—and I delivered the case you gave me?" he asked slowly.

"We think so. For Mr. Atkins told us it was not for one moment out of your hands. It must have been changed in my room before I brought it to you, though I had for it a strong chest with a combination lock."

Renshaw shot his glance over the heads of the passing pageant and frowned reflectively. The black leather case and its contents were safe. His courage clung to the life-line of that knowledge. When he got back to Tawno Ker, he would take up and try to work out the tangle of the freakish and unprofitable exchange.

"So now," Madame Hvoeslef added comfortably, "we will all have a cup of tea. My affairs have caused you a bad hour, Monsieur. I deeply regret this. Let us try to forget it."

She was already leading the way into the Palm room as she spoke, leaving the young man no choice save to follow her. He did so, inwardly fuming. He had no wish to drink tea with Miss Campbell, to watch her brilliant eyes look past him, to study anew the slightly superior line of her perfect upper lip. In the Palm room, however, quite unconsciously and partly from sheer force of old-time habit, he quietly put the others in the position of being his guests.

Verity limited her participation in the social function to the aloof drinking of a cup of tea. She was oddly impressed by the naturalness with which Renshaw had put her and Madame Hvoeslef into the position of his guests, the sudden revelation of force in this man she had half-consciously despised as a weakling. The impression of strength faded when the three re-entered the famous corridor.

"You will drive back with us, Monsieur Renshaw?" Madame Hvoeslef made the suggestion, taking for granted Verity's approval of the invitation. Renshaw hesitated. His self-consciousness had again settled over him like a tight-fitting garment, trimmed with indecision.

"I—I hardly know," he stammered.

"Yes, I suppose I might as well—if you have room for me—and if you have time to stop at the station for my bag—"

He was looking at Verity now, and for once she met his glance. There was a new element in her own. It was perhaps less cordiality than the absence of her usual indifference. Whatever it was, it was human. So, too, was her reply.

"Of course we have room," she said carelessly. "We came in the limousine."

He followed them in silence to that luxurious vehicle. Hart and a strange chauffeur stood together beside it, lost to their surroundings in the charm of a confidential conversation. As the little party reached him, Hart straightened and saluted. He turned at once to Verity.

"I beg pardon, Miss," he said deferentially. "But would you mind if this man—Henry Rickett, he is—drives you home tonight? I know it's unusual, but I got bad news in town—of a personal nature," he interrupted himself to explain—"and I got to be here till tomorrow, if you can get along without me."

"Why—I suppose so, Hart," Verity hesitated, glancing uncertainly from her chauffeur to the proposed substitute. "Does he know the way?"

"Yes'm. An' he knows the car, too."

Verity stepped back to allow Madame Hvoeslef to precede her into the limousine.

"Very well," she said indifferently. "Thank you, Miss. I'll be out on the train by tomorrow noon."

Both women were in the car, obviously waiting for Renshaw to follow them. He did so, after a perceptible hesitation, closing the door and taking a seat facing them. Darkness was falling, and the limousine made its way slowly through the crowded streets, stopping at the station for Renshaw's bag. Twice the new chauffeur was the object of winged rebukes from traffic policemen. He seemed not to know the traffic rules as well as he knew the car and the road. Indeed, Renshaw soon began to suspect that he did not know even these as well as Hart's encomium would lead one to believe. Several times he hesitated at turns. Also, the gears of the car protested raucously each time he shifted them.

Madame Hvoeslef talked in her casual, charming way, with a new and intriguing note of friendliness, and Renshaw responded. He was conscious of an increased and growing liking for this polished product of another land. He even ceased to resent her air of mystery. Certainly she had been a thoroughbred today in the consideration she had shown him and apparently she had left her atmosphere of mystery in the safe-deposit box with her recovered treasure. Above all, he admired the tact with which she avoided all allusion to her own affairs or to his.

A sudden jolt startled him, then another. The car had lurched and recovered itself. The first snowfall of the season was beginning, and very soon the heavy flakes were coming down so thickly as to cloud vision. The new chauffeur was having difficulty in keeping to the road.

Suddenly Renshaw leaned forward and addressed the girl.

"Miss Campbell," he said crisply, "this fellow doesn't know how to drive. Do you mind if I get out and take the wheel?"

Verity looked startled. In her absorption it was clear that she had not observed the jolts or the driver's repeated hesitation at crossroads.

"Why, aren't we almost there?" she asked, vaguely looking about her.

"No; we're not much more than half

way. And it's snowing hard, and the new man doesn't know the road. There are some nasty spots between here and Tawno Ker." Renshaw's voice grew more incisive. "I really think you'd better let me drive," he finished.

For a few seconds Verity was silent. When she spoke, her words revealed the character of her thoughts. "Drive, by all means," she murmured, "if you would feel more comfortable."

Renshaw felt the blood rush to his head. The remark itself he accepted as an insult. Also, it reminded him of something he had forgotten. His muscles grew lax under the impulse to sit back and let the ass at the wheel ditch them all, if he had to. Then, quietly, he tapped on the window to stop the car, and when the driver obeyed the signal, he got out and raised the young man from his seat with a single and compelling gesture.

"It's so thick you can't see," he said casually, as he took the wheel. "I know the road."

The chauffeur took the seat beside him without protest, muttering something about snow in his eyes. Renshaw drove in silence for ten minutes, then stopped abruptly beside a small wooden structure whose one lighted window shone mistily, through the storm.

"This is the Ardville station," he told the substitute. "A train for New York stops here in about half an hour."

He offered the man a bill as he spoke, but the chauffeur shrank away.

"Say," he muttered peevishly, "what's the idea?"

Renshaw spoke pleasantly, but his voice had hardened: "I'm sorry if you have a date with one of the maids, but the best thing you can do tonight is to get back to town. You can see the girl later."

"I'm d—d if I will," muttered the man. "What right you got to butt in? It's the lady that engaged me."

"That's true but she has just told me to take your place. Come, now." At the last two words the man started. The tone was new and menacing. "I'll give you exactly one minute to get down and away. Don't forget this." He was still holding out the bill, and at last the man took it.

"Oh, all right," he said grumpily, "if that's the way you feel about it. I was only tryin' to help out a pal."

"Very creditable of you, I'm sure. Good-night."

Renshaw started the car, but his eyes were on the man. "Toddle right into the nice warm station," he advised.

The man drifted languidly toward the station door. He had thrust the bill into his pocket, and he seemed annoyed but philosophic. Shut away from the drift of the conversation, though within sound of the man's voices, the two inside the limousine watched the scene.

"He's sending him back to New York," Verity interpreted, with a flush of annoyance. "That young man is taking a great deal upon himself. If I had realized what he meant to do—"

She stopped to give an appreciative mind to the perfection of Renshaw's driving. It was as perfect a thing as Hart's, and this was superlative praise.

"He can drive, anyway," she conceded.

The limousine stopped with a jerk. Renshaw leaped from his place and hurried around to the back of the car. Opening the door and leaning out to discover what had happened, Verity caught his words. They were a trifle hurried. He had pursued for a few feet and had caught something that was vigorously protesting against the capture.

"Come, now," said Renshaw. "This is getting annoying, you know. You're a lot keener on that maid than I thought you were."

"Leggo me," responded another breathless but urgent voice.

The owner of the voice seemed to be getting a violent shaking. His words came out in gasps that suggested this. By looking through the window at the rear, Verity now had an excellent moving picture of the scene.

"The chauffeur we thought we left at the station merely ran after the car and hung on," she reported to Madame Hvoeslef. Both received the full benefit of Renshaw's next words:

"I'm inclined to give you a good thrashing."

"Aw, come off; I'll beat it," the other hopefully suggested.

"All right. Let's see how fast you can beat it down that road."

The fellow started, but his movements were not swift enough to satisfy the exacting observer. The latter gave an order, and made a movement as if to follow him, and the man broke into a lope. For a minute or two Renshaw watched him, till the running form was lost to view. Then, abruptly shutting the car door, and ignoring his passengers as absolutely as if they were not there, he resumed his place at the wheel and the car swept on through the storm.

In the driveway leading up to Tawno Ker, Verity spoke for the first time in half an hour.

"Mr. Renshaw takes entirely too much upon himself," she observed between set teeth.

The words were addressed as much to herself as to the other woman. Madame Hvoeslef answered them with a polite confirmatory murmur that ended in a confidence.

"But nevertheless I am becoming interested in this new secretary, my dear. It grows clear to me as I watch him that he is not what we thought at first, slow-minded and a little dull. I think," she thoughtfully added, "your Monsieur Renshaw has somewhere in him a good deal of a man."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

# THE BLUE CIRCLE

**Chapter VII**  
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A Message.

The secretary dressed for dinner that night with his mind on several new problems, the first of which was the problem of the black leather case. Looked at from every possible angle, he could not wholly solve it, though he was rapidly evolving a working theory. If he were to have any peace and comfort this year, if he were to get back his nervous strength and recover for himself the man he had been, he must do certain things, and do them quickly. Among them, he must once and for all do away with the melodramatic mysteries of Tawno Ker. He must find out what there was in the house that crept along halls and climbed up to transoms and stole and duplicated leather cases and then returned them. After that, perhaps, he would have some comfort—a condition he could not hope for now. This very night, for example, he was probably in for some infernal manifestation that would deprive him of the sleep he so urgently needed.

However, he was, in a way, prepared for these. He had two pistols now, and the other articles he had bought. The pistols were loaded and ready. In one way the fact was reassuring. In another it disturbed him. He did not wish to do any impulsive shooting and subsequently and bitterly regret it. He began to feel that he had made a mistake in buying the pistols. He considered hiding them in his trunk. He ended by hiding one there and slipping the other into a pocket of his evening trousers. It was a very small, unobtrusive pistol. He had been careful to select that kind. And undoubtedly it would be safer in his hands than in the dark and sinister hand he had seen through his transom window the night before.

Dinner that night was again almost gay. Madame Hvoeslef was her most engaging self. Evidently, with the transference of the black leather case to the Trust company's vaults a great weight had rolled off her mind. Verity and David Campbell responded to her mood. Soft ripples of laughter swept the table, laughter in which Renshaw did not join but which he subconsciously enjoyed.

It was rather wonderful to hear Verity Campbell laugh, and he had not realized that her beautiful but rather cold face could be so warmed and illumined as he saw it now. Her laugh was delicious—soft, low, and full of mirth. He listened to Mrs. Pardee but looking at Verity, and as he looked his dislike of her and his inner masculine resentment of her cool self-sufficiency gave place to his first impulse of genuine admiration. Something like admiration had stirred in him when he watched her play with We-wee. He began to realize that the beautiful Miss Campbell had two sides. That was disturbing. With the discovery of an attractive side, he could not lend himself to the wholehearted disapproval of her which he had expected and desired to feel.

Her singing after dinner strengthened this conviction. It, too, reflected her new mood. The Slavic songs to which heretofore she and Madame Hvoeslef had largely confined themselves made way tonight for French and Spanish numbers, in which the predominating theme of love was wedded to that of joy.

Listening in his corner, Renshaw felt his lip curl a trifle. Much that girl knew about love! The foreigner knew. There was a woman who had loved and lived and died a few times and been born again, always with a heart



He Threw Open the Door and Stared Incredulously. Verity Campbell Stood Before Him.

attuned to life and the master hand. She must have had many lovers. She was the type whose inner fires were fierce and consuming—and soon exhausted, and readily replenished. He wondered what she and Miss Campbell talked about when they were alone. Certainly not about love! The foreigner was too sophisticated to permit Verity Campbell's clear eyes to rest on any untidy pages in her book of life.

He recalled his vagabond thoughts with a suddenness that brought him upright in his chair. Without analyzing his reasons, he felt that speculation as to the possible lovers of the

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foreigner was, in a way, pardonable. Certainly he had indulged in it without the sense of recoil he now felt. The recoil merged into a grim amusement at his own expense. He was making progress, he was getting back in touch with life, when he found himself speculating about women! He resolutely centered his thoughts on the black leather case.

He went up to his room at eleven o'clock. Before he opened the door he stood for a moment in front of it, silently studying the lock. It was a good lock, but an ordinary one. A trifle he had bought in town would effectually prevent it from being locked from the outside. He entered his room and inserted this trifle into the keyhole, nodding with satisfaction as he did so. No one outside could lock his door tonight. On the other hand, neither could he himself lock it. He drew forward a chair, inserted its back under the door-knob, and so placed it that a certain effort would be required to push the door open. He could not be taken wholly by surprise. After these simple preparations, he read and smoked for a time. Then, with a sense of expectation mingled with other emotions, in which excitement, resentment, anxiety and nervousness predominated in turn, he undressed, got into bed and turned out the lights, putting one of the new revolvers under his pillow, but within immediate reach, as the final precaution for an interesting vigil.

He waited with taut nerves. It was almost midnight, time for the nocturnal activities of the Thing to begin. As soon as he heard the sounds announcing the Thing's near approach, he would fling open the door and spring out upon whatever was there. After that—well, after that he would at least know what he was up against.

The clock on his mantel struck twelve. He was almost convinced that nothing would happen. Possibly the Thing did not roam about every night. Possibly it would never roam about again. Probably it had been shut up, confined—

He closed his eyes, and swiftly opened them again. Something had touched them, passed them, and was focused on the wall. It was the blue circle—and this time he studied it closely. It was a circle about the size of a silver dime. Its blue color was a singularly vivid hue. It danced and quivered on the wall beside him, so close to him that he could put up his hand and touch it. As he did so, it vanished and the familiar darkness of the room closed around him.

He lay still and for the first time seriously tried to explain the circle to himself. It was, of course, as he had held from the first, a reflection from somewhere, from something. That wise conclusion was still obvious. But from what?

The visiting light appeared again. It was as feverishly active now as it had been motionless on its previous visits. It touched his face, flitted about, and came to rest on the footboard of his bed. It touched his hand, and flew to the opposite wall. It played about his lips and leaped to the door leading to the hall, where it glowed silently on a panel.

Renshaw watched it with a gaze that shifted when it did. If he closed his eyes, it lingered on the lids till he reopened them. Its character changed. It had been interesting at first. It became annoying, like the repeated attacks of one mosquito on a hot night. It became first infuriating and at last simply devilish.

He rose and, going in turn to the room's four windows, stared out at each. With his movement the light disappeared. He could see nothing outside but the storm and the tortured, wind-sung branches of oaks and maples. He went to his door, opened it and glanced down the dark corridor. No sound or movement there rewarded him. He closed the door, replaced the chair-back under the knob, and returned to his bed. As soon as he was comfortably settled, the blue ball entered, touched his face, and danced for a moment on the wall. Then suddenly it grew quiet and remained fixed in one spot, like a watchful and infernal blue eye.

The clock struck two, the deep-toned strokes sounding ominous in the darkness. Two o'clock! And he had been on the edge of his nerves since eleven! That sort of thing would not do—it simply could not be endured. Tomorrow he would tell Campbell that he, Renshaw, must go away, that he was not up to the work. But no, that would not do, either. He had already shown that he was up to the work. Campbell had referred at dinner to a lot of things to be done the next day. Well, then, he could say he was not in as good condition as he had imagined.

A sudden memory seared his consciousness. He could not resign! He had no situation to resign—simply because he had refused a situation. He was not his own master. He was, for a year, David Campbell's property, bought and, in part, actually paid for. On the morning of the day that had only just ended, Campbell had given him a generous advance on the purchase price; and the greater part of that advance he, Renshaw, had already spent in town. Even assuming that he was willing to break the agreement he and Campbell had en-

tered into, he must work a month to pay off the obligation imposed by that advance. In other words, he was a fixture here. He could not leave.

His eyes had closed and he had almost lost consciousness when he heard a noise in the hall. It was not the familiar thump, nor was it the equally abhorrent sound of crawling. It was the sound of footsteps—light and running. There was also the sound of hurried, excited breathing and of a rap on his door. He sprang out of bed and hastened to open it, disturbed yet reassured by the rap. It was alarmed, but it was normal. He threw open the door and stared incredulously. Verity Campbell stood before him in the darkness. He could not see her, but he knew her even before she spoke to him in a voice hushed and terrified.

"Oh, Mr. Renshaw," she gasped, "please come with me quickly! I can't find either Jenks or James—and something dreadful has happened to grandfather!"

Renshaw nodded and stepped back into his room.

"One moment," he said, "and I will be with you."

He thrust his feet into slippers and pulled a dressing gown over his pajamas, knotting the cords of the robe as he rejoined her. He had to run to catch up with her. Having summoned him, she was almost at the end of



He Lifted the Light Figure in His Arms as Easily as if It Had Been the Body of a Child.

the corridor when she felt him beside her. As they hurried past the central hall landing and into the west wing of the house, he asked a low-toned question or two. She replied in a voice that trembled.

"Madame Hvoeslef is with him," she said. "I called her first, when I could not get the servants. I can't imagine what has happened to Jenks. He is so reliable and faithful. But Aunt Katharine says they take a car and go into town sometimes at night, and perhaps she is right, though I never thought so."

"What's the matter with your grandfather?"

Renshaw's long, swinging stride was easily keeping pace now with her shorter steps.

"I don't know. I heard a fall. His bedroom is next to mine, you know. I thought I heard a groan. I ran out in the hall to his door and knocked. When there was no answer, I went in. He was lying in his bedroom, on the floor."

"Hurt? Unconscious?"

"I don't know. I ran for help—for Jenks first, then, when I couldn't find him, for Madame Hvoeslef. Auntie is of no use, of course, in a crisis, so we didn't even wake her."

She stopped as they reached what was evidently the door of the old man's bedroom, and passed through in silence, leaving the door open for Renshaw to follow her.

His first impulse was one of shock at the seeming lifelessness of the prone figure on the floor, over which Madame Hvoeslef was distractedly keeping guard. Her dark face lighted up with relief as the young man joined her.

"I have not ventured to do anything," she explained in a quick whisper. "He breathes; but I did not know if it would be wise to lift his head—"

Renshaw knelt beside his master, and his heart lightened. He had been afraid of violence, even of tragedy. Anything, he now believed, might happen in Tawno Ker. But seemingly what had happened was common enough. The old man had felt ill, had risen, had perhaps tried to call for help, and had fallen unconscious.

"What is it?"

Verity asked the question in a whisper. The young man went on with his hurried examination.

"A shock, I'm afraid."

"Is he—dying?"

"No—no, indeed. He's unconscious, but his heart is working well. The first thing to do is to make him comfortable."

He lifted the light figure in his arms as easily as if it had been the body of a child, and carrying it to the bed laid it between the sheets, drawing the bedclothing carefully up around it.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)  
Cultivated hazel nuts have a shell only half as hard as wild ones.