

# THE ROOT OF EVIL

BY  
THOMAS DIXON



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(CONTINUED.)

When the last note of the song died away, quivering with a sentimental tenderness and passion he brushed a tear from his eyes, lifted his hands high above his head and made a motion which said to her, "Tumultuous applause."

She nodded and smiled, and he rushed behind the scenes to ask an explanation.

He grasped both her hands and found them cold and trembling with excitement.

"What on earth does this mean?"

"Simply that I was engaged to sing tonight, and I wanted to surprise you. Didn't you like my song?"

"It lifted me to the gates of heaven, dear."

"Then I don't care whether any one else heard it or not. But I did so much wish that she might have heard it or her husband because they are from the south."

"But I don't understand—your father hates Bivens so."

A big hand was laid on his shoulder and he turned and faced the doctor smiling.

"But I don't hate him, my boy. I've given up such foolishness. We've buried the hatchet. I'm to see him in a few minutes and we are to be good friends."

"Bivens invited you here to discuss a business proposition tonight?" Stuart exclaimed, blankly.

"No, no, no," the doctor answered. "I came with Harriet, of course. Her music teacher placed her on the program. But Mr. Bivens and I have had some correspondence and I'm to see him in a little while and talk things over quite informally, of course, but effectively."

"He has agreed to a conference here?" the young lawyer asked, anxiously.

"Why, of course. His butler has just told me he would see me immediately after the ball begins."

Stuart breathed easier and turned to Harriet.

"You look glorious tonight, little pal! Funny that I never saw you in evening dress before. You look so tall and queenly, so grown-up, so mature. You're beginning to make me feel old, child. I'll be thinking of you as a grown woman next."

"I am twenty-four, you know," she said, simply.

"I have never believed it until tonight. I wouldn't have known you at first but for your voice. I had to rub my eyes then."

The lights were suddenly turned lower, approaching total darkness. The attendants noiselessly removed the temporary stage and cleared the great room for the dancers.

As the chimes struck the hour of midnight, skeleton heads slowly began to appear peeping from the shadows of the arched ceiling and from every nook and corner of the huge cornice and pillars. Draperies of filmy crepe flowing gently in the breeze were lighted by sulphurous lined electric rays from the balconies. Tiny electric lights blinked in every skeleton's sunken eyes and behind each grinning row of teeth. Suddenly two white figures drew aside the heavy curtains in the archway and the dancers marched into the somber room.

The men were dressed as shrouded skeletons and the women as worms. The men wore light flimsy gray robes on which skillful artists had painted on four sides in deep colors the pictures of human skeletons.

The women wore curious light robes of cotton fiber which were drawn over the entire body and gave to each figure the appearance of a huge caterpillar.

The strange figures began to move slowly across the polished floor to the strains of a ghostlike waltz.

From the corners of the high balconies strange lights flashed, developing in hideous outlines and phosphorescent colors of the skeletons and long, fuzzy, exaggerated lines of the accompanying worms. The effect was thrilling.

Suddenly the music stopped with a crash. Each ghostly couple, skeleton and worm, stood motionless. The silvery note of a trumpet called from the sky. The blinking eyes of the death heads in the ceiling and on the walls faded slowly. The trumpet pealed a second signal—the darkness fled and the great room suddenly lit with 10,000 electric lights. The orchestra struck the first notes of a waltz, and, presto, in an instant the women appeared in all the splendor of the most gorgeous gowns, their bare arms and necks flashing

Bivens laughed cynically.

"This might be serious, Woodman. If it wasn't funny. But you had as well know once and for all that I owe you nothing. Your suit has been lost. Your appeal has been forfeited. My answer is brief, but to the point—not one cent. My generosity is for my friends—not my enemies."

"But we are not enemies personally," the doctor explained good naturedly. "I have put all bitterness out of my heart and come tonight to ask that bygones be bygones. You know that in God's great book of accounts you are my debtor."

"I owe you nothing."

In every account of the financier's voice the man before him felt the deadly merciless hatred whose fangs had been smoldering for years.

The doctor's voice was full of tenderness when he replied at last:

"My boy," he began quietly—"for you are still a boy when you stand beside my gray hairs—men may fight one another for a great principle without being personal enemies. We are men still, with common hopes, fears, ills, griefs and joys. When I was a soldier I fought the southern army, shot and shot to kill. I was fighting for a principle. When the firing ceased I helped the wounded men on the field as I came to them."

His voice quivered and broke for an instant.

"You have won. You can afford to be generous. That you can deny me in this hour of my desolation is unthinkable. I'm not pleading for myself. I can live on a rat's allowance. I'm begging for my little girl. I need \$2,000 immediately to complete her musical studies. Deep down in your heart of hearts you know that the act would be one of justice between man and man."

"As a charity, Woodman, I might give you the paltry \$50,000 you ask."

"I'll take it as a charity," he cried eagerly, "take it with joy and gratitude and thank God for his salvation sent in the hour of my need."

"But in reality you demand justice of me? Come to the point, Woodman, what is in your mind when you say that I am your debtor?"

"Simply that I have always known that your formula for that drink was a prescription which I compounded years ago and which you often filed for me when I was busy. As a physician I could not patent such a thing. You had as much right to patent it as any one else."

"In other words," Bivens interrupted coldly, "you inform me that you have always known that I stole from your prescription counter the formula which gave me my first fortune?"

The financier began to speak with slow venomous energy.

"I've let you ramble on in your snail-like talk, Woodman, because it amused me. For years I've waited your coming. Your unexpected advent is the sweetest triumph of this festive night."

He pushed and a sinister smile played about his mouth.

"The last time I saw you I promised myself that I'd make you come to me the next time and when you did that you'd come on your hands and knees. And I swore that when you looked up into my face groveling and whining for mercy as you have tonight, I'd call my servants and order them to kick you down my doorstep."

He bowed across the massive flat top desk to the secretary.

The doctor's fist suddenly gripped the outstretched hand and his eyes glared into the face of the financier with the dangerous look of a madman.

"You had better not ring that bell, yet," he said, with forced quiet in his tones.

"Your trade gives me an idea," said Bivens. "I want you to stay until the festivities end, and enjoy yourself. Take a look over my house. It cost two millions to build it, and requires half a million a year to keep it up. The butterflies those dancers are crushing beneath their feet in my ballroom I imported from Central America at a cost of \$5,000. The favors in jewelry I shall give to my rich guests who have no use for them will be worth \$25,000. Remember that I spent three hundred and fifty thousand on this banquet, which lasted eight hours and that I will see you and your daughter dead and in the bottomless pit before I will give you one penny. Enjoy yourself, it's a fine evening."

Before the doctor could answer, the financier laughed and left the room.

For a long time the dazed man stood motionless. He passed his big hand over his forehead in a vague instinctive physical effort to lift the fog of horror and despair that was slowly strangling him.

He felt that he was suffocating. He tore his collar apart to give himself room to breathe. He thrust his hand into the top pocket of his dress suit where he usually carried a handkerchief and felt something hard and cold.

It was a revolver he had been accustomed to carry of late in his rounds through the dangerous quarters of the city. Without thinking, when he dressed, he had transferred it to his evening suit. His hand closed over the ivory handle with a sudden fierce joy.

"Yes, I'll kill him in his magnificent ballroom," he said, half aloud. "I'll give a fit climax to his dance of death and the worm."

He quickly descended the stairs and saw Bivens talking with his wife. He didn't wish to kill him in her presence, and as he passed a look of hatred flashed from the little black eyes of the millionaire. He made up his mind to kill him at the moment the dance was at the highest pitch of gaiety.

The music began, and the dancers once more whirled into the center of the room and the crowd filled the space

under the grand arch which led into the hall. Bivens was the center of an admiring group of sycophants and worshipful snobs. The doctor's heart gave a mad throb of joy. His hour had come.

With quick strides he covered the space which separated them and with-out a moment's hesitation thrust his hand into his breast for his revolver. Not a muscle or nerve quivered. His finger touched the trigger softly and he gave Bivens a look which he meant



His Finger Touched the Trigger Softly.

out of his life.

Harriet watched him with keen joy and deep in her heart a secret hope began to grow slowly.

The day she sailed he refused to go with her to the pier.

"Why, Jim, you must come with me," she protested.

"No, I can't, little pal. Goodby."

He watched the cab roll down Fourth street toward the pier while a great wave of loneliness overwhelmed him.

At night the doctor was not at home. Stuart rapped on his door next morning and got no answer. The girl said he had spent the night out—she didn't know where.

As Stuart was about to leave for his office the doctor entered. His bloodshot eyes were sunken deep behind his brows, his face haggard and his shoulders drooped. Stuart knew he had tramped the streets all night in a stupor of hopeless misery.

Stuart took his outstretched hand and led him into the library. "I know why you tramped the streets: the old house is very lonely."

"I never knew what loneliness meant before!" The big hand fell in a gesture of despair.

Stuart pressed his hand.

"I understand, I'm younger than you doctor, but I, too, have walked that way alone. You're all in; you must go to bed and sleep."

When Stuart returned early from his work in the afternoon he found a group of forlorn women and children standing beside the stoop. A pale, elfish looking boy of ten, whose face appeared to be five years older, sat on the lower step crying.

"What's the matter, kiddie?" he asked kindly.

"I wants de doctor—me mudder's sick. She'll croak before mornin' ef he don't come—dey all wants him." He waved his dirty little hand toward the others. "He ain't come around no more for a week. The goll says we can't see him—he's asleep."

"I'll tell him you're here. The doctor's been ill himself."

He urged the doctor to go at once to see his patients. The work he loved would restore his spirits. He was dumfounded at the answer he received.

"No, no, I'm in no mood to work. I couldn't help them. I'd poison and kill them all, feeling as I do today. A physician can't heal the sick unless there's healing in his own soul. I'd bring death, not life, into their homes. Tell them to go away."

Stuart emptied his pockets of all the money he had in a desperate effort to break their disappointment.

"The doctor's too ill to see you now," he explained. "He sent this money for you and hopes it will help you over the worst until he can come."

He divided the money among them, and they looked at it with dull disappointment. They were glad to get it, but what they needed more than money was the hope and strength of their friend's presence.

"Doctor," Stuart began gently, "I've known you for about fifteen years. You're the only father I've had in this big town, and you've been a good one. You've been acting strangely for the past two weeks. You're in trouble."

"The greatest trouble that can come to any human soul" was the bitter answer. "But," he panted, and his eyes stared at the ceiling as he groaned, "I've got to bear it. What's the use to whine?"

Stuart stepped close and slipped his arm about the stalwart figure. His voice was tender.

"Come, doctor; you're not fooling me. I've known you too long. There's only one man on earth for whom I'd do as much as I would for you—my own gray haired father down south. Come now; tell me what's the trouble?"

Stuart could feel the big form sway and tremble under the stress of over-

whelm emotion, and his arm pressed a little closer. And then the tension suddenly broke.

The doctor sank into a chair and looked up with a helpless stare.

"Yes, Jim, I will. I'll tell you."

And he related his experiences in the Bivens mansion, ending with:

"I stole a case—of jewels!"

Stuart sprang to his feet, with an exclamation of horror.

"You—did—what?"

"Yes," the doctor went on hoarsely. "I stole a case of his jewels and sent my girl abroad. I'm going to plead guilty now and go to prison. I shall never again lift my head in the haunts of men."

Stuart sobbed in anguish.

(To Be Continued.)

He should take with him into eternity, when just beyond him he saw Harriet. She stood motionless with a look of mute agony on her fair young face, watching Stuart talk to Bivens' wife.

His finger slipped from the trigger, and his hand loosed its deadly grip.

"Have I forgotten my baby?" he cried in sudden anguish. And then another vision flashed through his excited brain. A courtroom, a prisoner, his own bowed figure the center of a thousand eyes while the jury brought in their verdict.

His breath came in labored gasps as one and thought succeeded another.

"No," he said hoarsely, "I must save her. I must be cunning. I must succeed, not fail. I must get what I came here for. I must save my baby. My own fate is of no importance. She is everything."

Bivens had taken from him by fraud his formula, destroyed his business and robbed him of all he possessed. The law gave him power to hold it. He, too, would appeal to the same power and take what belonged to him. No matter how, he would take it, and he would take it tonight.

Bivens had boasted that his favors in jewelry would be worth \$25,000.

The doctor turned quickly and began to search the house until he found the half-drunken servant arranging these packages under the direction of a secretary. These favors had been made for the occasion by a famous jeweler—a diamond pin of peculiar design, a gold death's head with diamond teeth and eyes surmounted by a butterfly and a caterpillar. The stones in each piece were worth \$100. They lay on a table in little open jewel boxes, fifty in a box, and each box contained \$5,000 worth of gold and precious stones.

The doctor inspected the boxes with exclamations of wonder and admiration. He bent low over the table for an instant, and when he left one of the jewel cases rested securely in his pocket.

He was amazed at his own skill and a thrill of fierce triumph filled his being as he realized that he had succeeded and that his little girl would go to Europe and complete her work. He spoke pleasantly to the secretary and congratulating him on his good fortune in securing such a master, turned and strolled leisurely back to the ballroom.

Not for a moment did he doubt the safety of his act. He was a chemist and knew the secret of the laboratory. He would melt the gold into a single bar and sell the diamonds as he needed them. His only regret was that he could not have taken the full amount he had demanded of the little scoundrel. He found Harriet and they started at once for home.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, when I could forget the pain in my heart. You succeeded? It's all right? I'm going abroad at once to study?"

The doctor laughed aloud in a burst of fierce joy.

"Certainly, my dear!"

The tears sprang into the gentle eyes as she answered gratefully.

"You can't know how happy you've made me."

Bivens, who had heard the doctor's laughter, passed and said with exaggerated courtesy:

"I trust you have enjoyed the evening, Woodman?"

The doctor laughed again in his face.

"More than I can possibly tell you."

Bivens followed to the door and watched him slowly walk down the steps.



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(To Be Continued.)



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