

Tales of MAGIC

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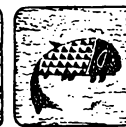
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Slave of the Poppy

Wildwood Had Had Adventures—Splendid Ones. At Times the Glory of the World Had Been So Dazzling, the Wine of Life So Strong, That He Had Felt More Like a God Than a Man. And So He Continued a Slave of the Poppy Until——

By N. W. JENKINS

AT THE hour of sunset, Wildwood awoke from a cold, frightened sleep, on his uneasy bed in the west attic of the Chateau Villaret. He lay for a moment and then arose and dressed himself with shaking hands.

"You're a mask of death," he said, as he passed the looking glass. He turned out his empty pockets, cursing them and the nakedness of the stripped garret. As he descended to the street, clinging to the old rosewood rail of the endless stairway, he had two thoughts in his mind. One was "Does life hold any more adventures for me?" and the other: "Where can I get a grain of heroin tonight?"

Wildwood had had adventures—splendid ones. At times, the glory of the world had been so dazzling, the wine of life so strong, that he had felt more like a god than a man. But the long level stretches between such heights—he had all but died of those, until he discovered heroin. Finally certain things had transpired, necessitating his departure from home, and he had come to New Orleans.

The Chateau, a magnificent mansion once, a rookery now, was a place one could live in for almost nothing. He lived there for quite a long while behind the black, but beautiful oriel window that looked out into the sky.

But the heroin? From whence was that to come? The druggists would give him no further credit, though he had been a doctor once, and a good one. He had nothing left to sell, everything negotiable having passed under the Three Balls long before. Work—there was none for him.

So there remained only—the bread line? D—n their bread! It was heroin he wanted. There was the river! And the river it would have to be unless something turned up quickly. He detested the idea. Not that he was afraid—not he! But death appeared to be the end of everything. One couldn't be sure, of course, but it looked that way, and—*Quien Sabe?* There might be more adventures in this life, if he could hang on a little longer, and that was worth suffering for, instead of the black water, and oblivion.



A light step on the stair, a lighter hand on the door, and Lalage entered

He was dreaming wide awake, it seemed. That morning he had seen Lalage around a street corner as he turned it. He had fled wildly, forgetting that she, being but a dream figment, couldn't see him. Lalage was the girl he had loved. He loved her still.

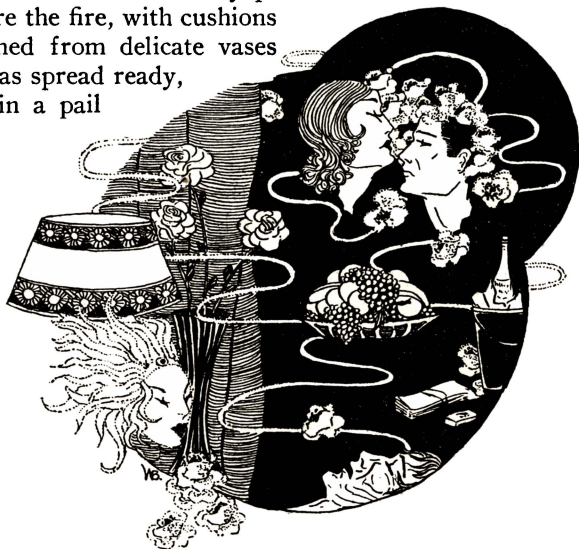
The heroin! The terrible pang in his heart told him he must have heroin or die. He dashed away; then, remembering that he was on the street, drew himself up, and bracing his wrecked body with a great effort, sought the business streets.

TOWARD midnight Wildwood returned. He had drifted back because his limbs would no longer support him, and he had need of a place to die in. Under his feet as he walked he could hear a curious, cottony sound: *pad, pad*. He felt in his body, a vast, immeasurable emptiness. He turned a corner, and the Chateau Villaret loomed up before him. The oriel window was aglow with light—colored like a rose—and behind the glass hung crisp, lacy curtains. He drew in his breath sharply.

Up the interminable stairs he climbed, one step at a time. He stood at his own door, trembling, before opening it.

A fire of logs leaped and sparkled in the hearth—that late damp abode of mice and spiders. Soft radiance poured from a rose shaded lamp. A Persian rug hid the worm-eaten flooring. In the place of his bed of planks and the torn blanket was an alluring couch, a snow bank of downy pillows and silken coverlets. A lovely fauteuil stood before the fire, with cushions heaped beside it. Tall roses leaned from delicate vases on the mantel. A buffet supper was spread ready, and a gold-necked bottle lurked in a pail of ice. And—oh, Paradise!—on a tiny tray beneath the lamp lay a dainty hypodermic syringe and a vial of heroin tablets. . . .

Five minutes later, he went out, with a firm, assured step, running lightly down the stairs, in his pocket the roll of yellow backed bills he had found beside the tablets. Quickly he visited the barber, the tailor, the haberdasher, and outfitted himself suitably. It does not take long to do these things when a man feels young and strong, and has the wherewithal.



How could they know of his triumphant passing?

RETURNING, in broadcloth and fine linen, a tuberose in his buttonhole, he stood again in the attic before the bright mirror that had miraculously taken the place of the cracked bit of glass. His appearance was irreproachable, from his high-flung dark head to his graceful, varnished boots. He had all the properties with him—silk hat, lightweight overcoat, toy cane, gold-banded cigar between his finger tips. "You're a handsome devil, Wildwood," he remarked encouragingly.

A light step on the stair, a lighter hand on the door, and Lalage entered, as he had known she would. Lalage, lovelier than ever!

He would gladly have lingered in rapt contemplation of her beauty—the glory of her eyes, the roseleaf softness of her cheek, the lustre of her hair; and her nymph-like form, in its shimmering garments such as nymph never wore. But she gave a glad little cry, and flew to his arms, like a homing bird.

THE clock struck three. Wildwood reclined in the fauteuil, Lalage at his feet, her head against his knee.

"I have done nothing but seek you, Richard," she was saying, "since I came into grandmother's millions. You were all I wanted. But I should never have found you, had it not been for the Little Minister."

"Who's he, Sweetheart?"

"The Chaplain at the Army Post down the river. And oh, he's the *best* little sport ever! He—he cares for me, Richard, just as I care for you. And he knows—about us."

"*He knows?* You told him, Lalage? *Everything?*"

"Everything. Richard, it was too wonderful that he should have been sent here, where you were. It was he who traced you, and told me where to find you. I want him to marry us, tomorrow. And then we'll go away, traveling. We'll put a girdle round the earth, Dicky, like Puck. We can have the *best* times! We'll have some of those adventures you used to dream of!"

Wildwood, kissing her softly, wondered a little. Does a man have real adventures, after he is married? He looked at her and smiled. "Lalage," he said gently, "you don't—you are perfectly *sure* you don't feel it a sacrifice?"

She caught him to her heart, crying aloud at the sacrifice.

FOUR O'CLOCK. She had fallen so sound asleep that she could lift her head from his knee to the cushioned chair without awakening her. He stood for a moment, and watched her as she slept. Then, tiptoeing to the table, he deftly slipped the contents of the little vial into a champagne glass, and watched the hypodermic drink it up. A prick, a pang—such a pleasing little pang!—and it was done. He stood on the Persian rug, gazing thoughtfully into the fire. "The best of them all," he said. "The adventure of the enchanted garret!" And he lay down to sleep, with his head in the lap of Lalage.

THOSE who found him huddled on the floor, beside the cold hearth, felt a thrill of pity, that he should have died so miserably, and alone. How could they know of his triumphant passing—of the exquisite madness, vouchsafed to the Slave of the Poppy, at the very end, before the light goes out? *They* little imagined the splendor and delight of his last hours.