

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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*A Gripping, Powerful Story by a Man Who Always Tells a Good Tale*

# The Blade of Vengeance

*By George Warburton Lewis*

**T**HE OUTCOME was all the more regrettable because Henry Fayne had staked so much on the success of his great venture. He had renounced innumerable bachelor friendships for Leonor, only to discover within a year of the celebrated social event, which had been their wedding, that he was linked for life to a captivating adventuress.

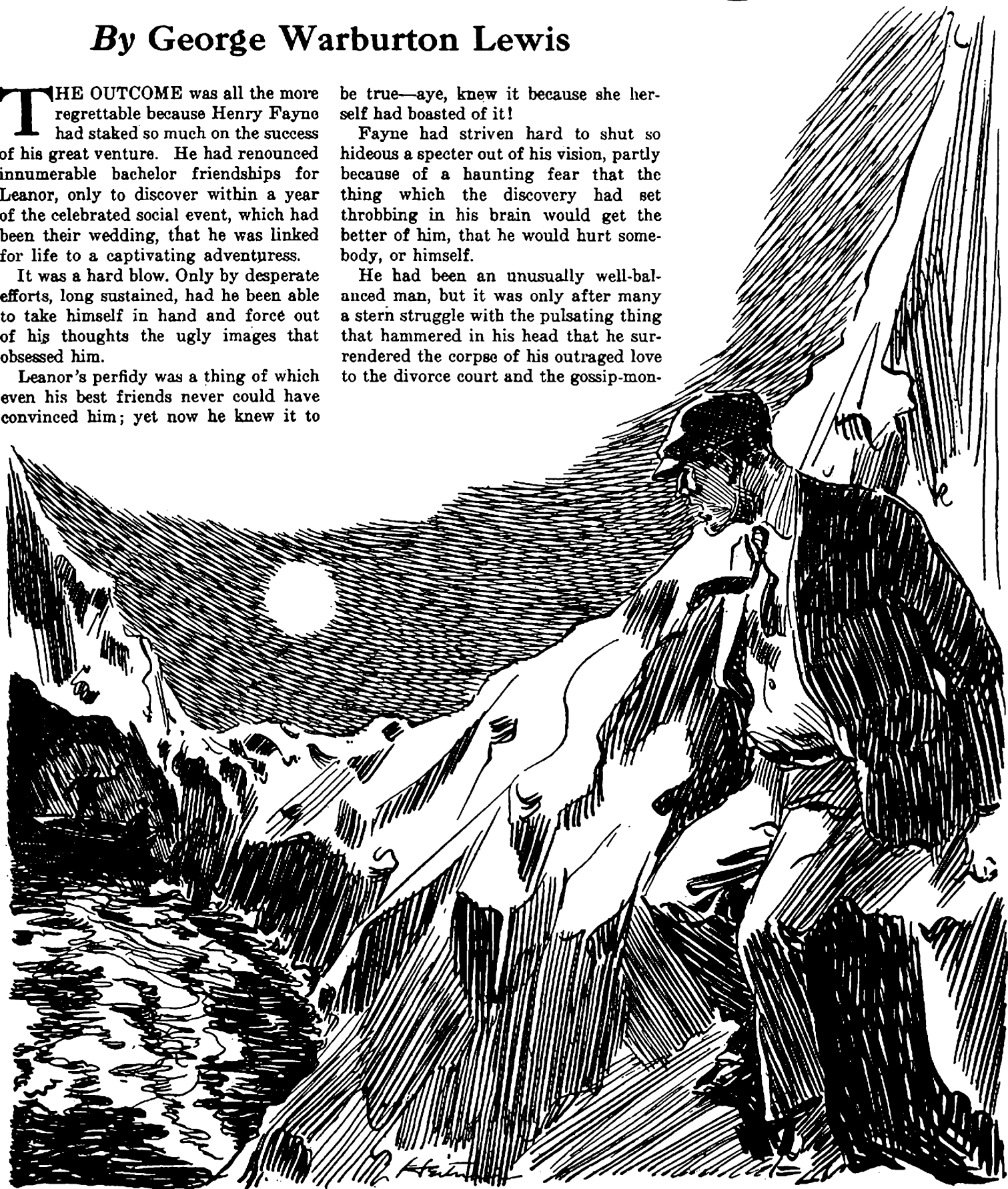
It was a hard blow. Only by desperate efforts, long sustained, had he been able to take himself in hand and force out of his thoughts the ugly images that obsessed him.

Leonor's perfidy was a thing of which even his best friends never could have convinced him; yet now he knew it to

be true—aye, knew it because she herself had boasted of it!

Fayne had striven hard to shut so hideous a specter out of his vision, partly because of a haunting fear that the thing which the discovery had set throbbing in his brain would get the better of him, that he would hurt somebody, or himself.

He had been an unusually well-balanced man, but it was only after many a stern struggle with the pulsating thing that hammered in his head that he surrendered the corpse of his outraged love to the divorce court and the gossip-mon-



gers, and went sadly back to his bachelor haunts in the hope of forgetting. But he was appalled to find that he no longer fitted in.

The friends of the free and easy days of his celibacy were sincere enough in their pity for him, though in no way disposed to put themselves out seeking reclamation. In short, they might as well have said in chorus:

"You couldn't have expected us to forewarn you; you'd have quit us cold. You had to discover it for yourself, and the operation of finding out has simply rendered you impossible as one of the old crowd. Sorry, old man, but, after all, it's better that you should know."

So Henry Fayne brooded, lost his nerve, and then, all of a sudden—disappeared.

The old circle knew his set and cynical face no more. There were ruinors of mental breakdown and suicide, and there was one report (little credited, however) that the unfortunate fellow had drifted down into the wilds of South America and become an eccentric and a recluse.

Leonor tired, in time, of the murderous velocity of her social chariot, dumped the winged vehicle on the trash-heap and went abroad, accompanied by a less rich and more ambitious retinue of high livers.

Like vari-colored butterflies, five years winged overhead, years by no means lacking in color and variety for Leonor. Exacting as were her tastes, she could scarcely have desired a more changeful, a more exquisitely exhilarating life.

Only once in a blue moon did she think of Henry. Thoughts of him, like all other memories of her meteoric-past, had been crowded into oblivion by the inrush of the more intimate and actual.

Henry had been very good to her, she had to admit, but he had been none the less impossible. The outcome had been inevitable from the beginning. He was fifteen years her senior. She knew that she could never have held her volatile self down to a life of self-sacrifice and suffering with Henry. The idea was no less absurd than the mating of an esthetic humming-bird with some sedate old owl.

When she consented to marry Henry she had entertained no such preposterous thought as exacting of him a compliance with the ridiculously restricted code of ethics he subsequently set for her. Indeed, she would have grown old and ugly with nothing accomplished, unseeking and unsought. Too, there would have been lamentably fewer notches on her ivory fan than the half-decade last past had yielded.

As the wretched venture had turned out, however, she was still under thirty and was, to employ the homely simile of her latest masculine objective, "as pretty as a peach."

**A**T THE Pacific entrance of the Grand Canal, where the town of Bandora drowns like a sprawling lizard on the sun-baked clay, word went round that the millionaire adventuress was yachting down the west coast, homeward bound.

Everybody who read the public prints knew about Leonor, so at least one element at Bandora awaited her arrival with curious interest. And the curious were to be gratified, for since pretty Leonor habitually did the unexpected, she only proved her consistency when, upon her arrival, she capriciously decided to tarry a fortnight, with the twofold object of having a look at the great waterway and exploring historic Batoga Island, only a couple of hours distant.

Should the mighty monument to engineering skill prove uninteresting, there remained the secret caves of Batoga, among them *La Guaca de San Pedro*, by allegation the identical haunted, bat-inhabited cavern in which buccaneering old Henry Morgan had once stored all of his ill-gotten gains and maybe imprisoned the unfortunate nuns captured at Porto Bello! And then, too, there was the celebrated Devil's Channel, which, according to widely circulated and much-believed stories, sucked small craft down into its omnivorous maw like some insatiable demon lying in wait.

Leonor devoted but little time to the prodigious engineering feat. After all, it was man-made, and what was man if not a purveyor to feminine caprices? Mere men were cheap. The adventuress knew, because she had bought and sold many of them. She had bartered the very souls of some.

She had bought them all with make-believe affection and disposed of them at a hundred per cent discount. She treated them much as one treats cast-off garments, experiencing only minor difficulties in disengaging herself from some of the more persistent.

A genuine Sybarite, Leonor's appetite for entities masculine had at last cloyed, and she now turned impatiently to inscrutable old Nature to make up the deficiency.

She went to Batoga, a verdant, mighty mountain, greenly shaggy, as yet unshorn by advancing civilization. It might have been a little separate world, set down by nature in a sleeping sea of

sapphire. Here, indeed, was something different.

She was wild with delight as soon as her dainty feet touched the shell-paved beach. Really, this wonderland was too splendidly perfect to share with her unpoetic company of paid buffoons! She sent the whole lot of them bagging back to Bandora, decided to employ a guide, a boatman, or a native maid, contingent upon her special needs, right on the ground.

It was due to this whim of Leonor's that I myself wandered into the cast, came to know Leonor and likewise the story I am telling you here. I had just come through a notably obstinate case of dengue in the sanitarium. My thin knees, in fact, were still somewhat wobbly, and I was urging them back to normal by means of a leisurely stroll across the rolling pasture-land. On a grassy, wind-swept hillside I came all unexpectedly upon Leonor.

Evidently she had thought to refresh her jaded wits by a revel in wild flowers. She was seated on a shelf of rock that rimmed the hill-crown, culling unworthy floral specimens. A single upward glance, and then her eyes dropped back to her flowers in a world-bored manner which I somehow felt a quick impulse to resent. At least I could annoy her. That was any fool's privilege.

"Gathering flowers?" I interrogated, just as though that fact were not as obvious as the blue sky itself.

For answer, my front-line fortifications were instantly swept by an ocular onslaught well calculated to obliterate. I smiled back engagingly at the source of the tempest.

"Some hill, this," I suggested, emitting a windy sigh after the exertion of its ascent.

And then I saw that my second drive had broken through her first-line trench on a front of about a quarter of an inch. Disdain died slowly out of her face—a face still unaccountably fresh and girlish—and something like pity at my apparent lack of sophistication took its place.

"You really think it a high hill?" she asked, faintly smiling and gazing at me steadily as though she doubted my sanity.

I noted that her hazel eyes seemed to swim in seas of a wonderfully sparkling liquid.

"Well," I qualified, affecting funereal gravity, "it's higher than some hills."

Her amused smile expanded perceptibly.

"Really, now, have you ever seen very many hills?"

"N-no," I reluctantly confessed, "not so very many."

"What induced you to measure this one?"

"Well, I was shadowing somebody," I said quietly. At last she had given me an opening.

"Whom, pray?" she demanded, her smile brightening expectantly.

"You—if you don't mind," I announced.

"Me!" She laughed deliriously for a moment.

"It's hardly a laughing matter," I said, with forced seriousness when she was still. "I've been working on this case for years."

She sobered with a suddenness that suggested ugly thoughts, perchance remembering something of her kaleidoscopic past. The hazel eyes saddened a little. It was evident that she was rummaging among happenings which it gave her small pleasure to review. I waited. Maybe I was not quite the yokel she had thought me.

"Do you mean you're a detective?" she presently asked.

"I mean just that, madam," I said evenly.

"By whom are you employed?" she questioned tentatively.

"By Henry Fayne," I casually replied.

"That is the lie of an impostor," quickly asserted the woman; "Henry Fayne is dead."

She rose from the stone shelf and prepared to desert me. Anyhow, I had won my point. I had succeeded in annoying her.

But I concluded I could hardly let the matter so end, even as affecting a woman like Leonor. Nobody can afford to be openly rude.

"Wait," I said; "let's be good sportsmen. You tilted at me and I retaliated. Honors are even. Why not forget it?"

She was greatly relieved; and besides, forgetfulness, of all things, was what she sought. After a moment, deep wells of laughter again glistened in her splendid eyes. These and the smiling young mouth somehow seemed to give the lie to the fiasco she had made of life. What a pity, I thought, that she had chosen to fritter away her life in this fatuous, futile fashion.

I had thought that I should feel only contempt for such a woman as Leonor, but as we walked down the hill she told me something that penetrated a hitherto unknown weak spot in my armor. So I all but pitied the woman I had prepared to despise.

As if to take strength from them, she kept her eyes on the wild flowers she had gathered, as she pronounced the well-nigh unbelievable words I now set down.

The craze for the blinding white lights, and the delusion of equally white wines, were surfeited. The gilt and tinsel of the truly tawdry had palled. The mask of allurements had fallen from the forbidding face of the artificial and empty. Life itself had become for Leonor a vacant and meaningless thing. She had seen too much of it in too brief a space.

She concluded with a seeming contradiction, a veiled regret that her frenzied explorations had exhausted all too soon the world's meager store of things worth while, and there was a bitterness in her voice which contrasted unpleasantly with her youth and beauty as she said plainly, though with little visible emotion, that she had reached a point where life itself often repelled and nauseated her.

We had reached the sanitarium by this time, an interruption not unwelcome in the circumstances, and I left the strange woman alone with her tardy regrets and sought my own quarters, sympathetic and depressed, yet thanking my lucky stars for the happy dispensation that had made me an adventurer instead of an "adventuress."

That evening, Leonor and I planned a trip to Devil's Channel, and I strolled down to the beach in search of such a shallow-draught *cayuco* as could maneuver its way over the reefs that barred larger craft. *Boteros* of divers nationalities abounded, and among the many my questioning gaze finally met that of a vagabondish-looking fellow countryman in a frayed sailor garb. In odd contrast to his raiment, and swinging from his belt in a sheath which his short coat for an instant did not quite conceal, I caught a single glimpse of a heavy hunting knife with an ornamented stag-horn handle.

His name was Sisson, he told me, but he spoke Spanish like a native. His uncarded beard was a thing long forgotten of razors. He was unmistakably another of those easily identified tramps of the tropics who, in an unguarded moment, unaccountably lose their grip on themselves and thenceforward go sliding unresistingly down to a not unwelcome oblivion.

Sisson did not importune me, as did all the other boatmen; he did not even offer me his services; and it was because of this evidence of some lingering vestige of pride, coupled with the fact

that he had an eminently suitable *cayuco*, that I decided to employ him.

AT THE narrow gateway of Devil's Channel the water is so shallow, and there so frequently occur tiny submerged sand-bars, that only the minutest of sea craft can skim over the gleaming rifts and gain entrance. This was confirmed for the nth time when I felt the specially made keel of our tiny *cayuco* scrape the shiny sand in warning that we were at last entering the canyon-like waterway.

Leonor and I were both plying our splendid oarsman with well-nigh every imaginable question about the gloomy, spooky-looking channel before us.

"Aren't we nearing *the place* yet?" Leonor presently asked.

"Farther in," drawled Sisson, the bearded giant of a boatman, glancing carelessly at the ascending cliffs on either side.

Twisting my body round in the wee native *cayuco*, I noted that the perpendicular walls of the shadowy strait that lay before us seemed drawing together with every pull of Sisson's great arms. Leonor's pretty face was radiant with expectation. Though bored of the world, there was at least one more thrill for her ahead.

Five minutes slipped by. Sisson rowed on steadily.

"There she is!" the boatman said suddenly, for the first time evincing something like a normal human interest in life. One of his huge, hairy hands was indicating an alkali spot on the face of the right-hand wall a stone's throw ahead. "Just opposite that white spot is where *it always happens*."

He released his oars and let them trail in the still water. It looked peculiarly lifeless. Our small shell gradually slowed.

"Seems to be all smooth sailing here today, though," I ventured.

"Overrated, for the benefit of tourists," opined Sisson. "The water's eaten out a little tunnel under the west wall, but there's no real danger if you know the chart."

"How many did you say were drowned when that launch went down?" again asked Leonor. Her great dark eyes were sparkling again now with a keen new interest in life—or was it the nearness to potential death?

"Eleven," drawled Sisson. "The engineer jumped for it and made a landing on that bench of slate over there, and right there"—he smiled reminiscently—"he sat for seventy-two hours, with 'water, water everywhere, nor any drop'—"

"And is it true that none of the life-preservers they were putting on when the launch sank was ever found?" Leonor also wanted to know.

"True enough," said Sisson, "but that's not unnatural. Drowning men lay hold of whatever they can and never, never turn loose. Why, I've seen the clawlike fingers of skeletons locked around sticks that wouldn't bear up a cockroach!"

"Did you say it was a relatively calm day?" I questioned the boatman idly.

"Sure. Calm as it is right now," he answered.

I observed casually that the oarsman was gazing fixedly at Leonor. Even on him, perhaps, beauty was not entirely lost. Doubtless, too, he had heard the gossip her arrival had set going along the wharves at Batoga. Meanwhile Leonor had made a discovery.

"Why, we're still making headway!" she broke out suddenly. "I—I thought we had stopped."

Sisson glanced down at the water, and his tanned brow broke up in vertical wrinkles of consternation. The look in his deepset eyes, though, did not, oddly enough, seem to match the perplexity written on his corrugated brow.

Our craft was sliding rapidly forward as though propelled by the oars. The phenomenon was due to a current; that much was certain, for we were moving with a flotsam of dead leaves and seaweed.

Again I screwed my body half round in the cramped bow and shot a glance ahead. God! we were shooting toward the dread spot on the alkali cliff as though drawn to it by an unseen magnet. I could see, too, that our speed was rapidly increasing.

Sisson snatched up the trailing oars and put his giant's strength against the invisible something that seemed dragging us by the keel, but all he did was to plough two futile furrows in the strange whirlpool. Our *capuco* glided on.

The *blasé* adventuress was never more beautiful. For the time, at least, life, warm and pulsating, had come back and clasped her in a joyous embrace. Her lips were parted in a smile of seemingly inexpressible delight. There was not the remotest suggestion of surprise or fear in her girlish face.

She put her helm over only when I shouted to her in wide-eyed alarm, but the keen, finlike keel of our specially built *capuco* obviously did not respond. Oblique in the channel, we slithered over, ever nearer to the west wall, the unseen agent of destruction towing us with awful certainty toward the vortex.

Still the surface of the water, moving with us, looked as motionless as a mill-pond! It was uncanny, nothing less.

I peered into the bluishly transparent depths, fascinated with wonder, and then, of a sudden, I saw that which alone might prove our salvation. Apparently we were in a writhing, powerful current, racing atop the seemingly placid undersea or sub-surface waters of the channel. I could make out many small objects spinning merrily about as they flew, submerging, toward the whirlpool.

We carried six life-belts. Two of these I snatched from their fastenings, slipped one about Leonor, and with the other but partly adjusted—for there remained no time—myself plunged out of our—as it were—bewitched craft in the direction of the west wall.

To my surprise I swam easily. When I made a deep stroke, however, I could feel strange suctorial forces tugging at my finger-tips. But for the moment I was safe.

I glanced about to see if Leonor had followed my lead. She was not in the water. I turned on my back and saw, to my utter amazement, that neither she nor Sisson had left the *capuco*.

This was unaccountable indeed. And it was now clear that it was too late for them to jump, for the light boat had already begun to spin round in a circle at a point exactly opposite the alkali spot! Faster and faster it flew, the diameter of the ring in which it raced swiftly narrowing.

As I swam, my shoulder collided with some obstruction. It was the west wall. I clambered up a couple of feet and sat dripping on a slime-covered shelf of slate, the identical slab on which the engineer of the sunken launch had thirsted.

I was powerless to help my companions. I could only sit and stare in near unbelief. Why—Why had they not abandoned the tiny craft with me? I saw now that neither had even so much as got hold of a life-belt. Why—?

*My God!* What was this I beheld? Sisson had advanced to the stern of the flying cockleshell where Leonor still sat motionless, unexcited, smiling. The charmed look of expectancy was still in her perfect face.

Sisson's voice, suddenly risen high, chilled me to the marrow. It might have been the voice of some martyr on the scaffold. He did not reveal his identity to Leonor. It was not necessary. Something—I dare not say what—enabled her in that awful moment of tragedy to know *her divorced husband*.

THE EXQUISITE torture of recollection had shriveled Henry Fayne's mentality and left him a semi-maniac, yet here, after all the cynical, embittering years was the physical, the carnate Henry Fayne, the long-discarded plaything of feminine caprice. His suffering was fearfully recorded in the seamed and bearded mask of his altered features.

The smile did not leave Leonor's face. The madman's voice rose in a shrill, terrible cry. He babbled and sputtered in consuming rage, but I caught the current of his wild harangue. He had waited all the years for this opportunity; he had followed her from Bandora, had laid all his plans with infinite nicety to avenge the wreck which Leonor had made of his life.

But the woman laughed defiantly, tensely; laughed derisively, full in the bearded face.

"You have waited too long, Henry," she said, evenly yet with a note of triumph in her tone; "I've worn threadbare every allurement of life. Today I came here seeking my last adventure—a sensation at once new and ultimate—*death!*"

It was here that the miracle supervened.

Chagrin, fierce and awful, distorted the hairy vagabond's face, and, balancing himself precariously in the crazily whirling dugout, he raised a great clenched fist. I once had seen a laughing man struck by lightning. As the rending voltage shot through him the muscles of his face had relaxed slowly, queerly, as if from incredulity, just as the furious, drawn face of Henry Fayne relaxed now. The menacing fist unclenched and fell limply at his side.

Of all the examples of thwarted vengeance I had ever seen on the stage, or off, this episode from real life was the most dramatic.

The boat had circled swiftly in to the center of the vortex and now spun crazily for a moment as though on a fixed pivot, like a weather-vane. Then it capriciously resumed its first tactics, only it now raced inversely in a rapidly widening circle, running well down in the water, as though from some powerful submarine attraction.

That the spurious boatman was a victim of some hopeless form of insanity I was certain when I saw him drop to his knees and extend both his great hands in evident entreaty to the woman who had stripped him of his honor and driven him, a driveling idio-maniac, into exile. Leonor sat impassive, but the madman continued to supplicate.

Never did my credulity undergo so mighty a strain as when, after a moment, the woman reached out and locked her slim hands in his. It was a strange picture, believe me! From my uncertain perch on the slimy ledge of slate, I stared, thrilling deep in my being at this futile truce on the brink of eternity.

Its revolutions greatly widened and its speed diminished, the tiny boat suddenly swerved from its circular course, bobbed upward as though a great weight had been detached from its keel and then drifted like some spout thing of life toward the west wall, where I crouched dumbfounded, my breath hissing in my nostrils, my lungs heaving.

Only now am I coming to the crux of this story of which the foregoing forms a necessary prelude.

Back at Batoga that same night, in an obscure corner of the wide cool porch of the palm-environed sanitarium, Henry Fayne and Leonor, after a long heart-to-heart talk alone, agreed to forgive and forget. Later in the evening Fayne went down to the contiguous village to assemble his meager belongings. They would be interesting souvenirs with which to decorate the walls of the rehabilitated home. I found Leonor sitting where he had left her on the porch, smiling enigmatically.

"Can I act, or not?" she asked me rather abruptly as I came up.

"Act?" I groped; "what do you mean?"

She sat there, smiling mysteriously in the white moonlight, until I at length prevailed upon her to pour into my incredulous ears how it had flashed upon her, in the crucial moment at the whirlpool, that she must convince Fayne that to destroy one who seeks death would give no satisfaction to a seeker after vengeance. She had made him see that the most effective way of wreaking his revenge would be to prevent her taking her own life and force her to live with him again as in the old days. What, indeed, could be greater punishment than that?

So once again the wily adventuress had tricked poor Henry Fayne. It had

been a close thing, but her lightning wits had saved her to look forward enchantedly to the prospect of other adventures. Though she had, in fact, tired of life, she had weakened before death; yet the fortitude of skillful artifice underlying that physical fear bespoke such a resourcefulness as I had never before seen in any woman.

She had spoken more truth than she knew when she said that Henry Fayne was dead, for, mentally, he no longer existed.

But Leonor had one more card to play. When she had outlined her campaign, I sat aghast at the frank inhumanity of her plans for the morrow. She had already made arrangements with the native officials of the nearby village. She was to appear in court and testify, and I was to be summoned to give evidence before the committing judge. Henry Fayne was to be ruthlessly chucked into the Acorn Insane Asylum!

After Leonor had retired to her apartment I lingered a while in the fragrant night to smoke a cigar and meditate, for I was badly upset by her pitiless resolve. As I sat reviewing the strange events of the day, the dark figure of a man, half bent and retreating rapidly among the dappled shadows of the palms, startled me unpleasantly.

At my first glimpse of the skulker, some sixth sense told me that he had been eavesdropping Leonor and me from under the elevated porch on which I sat. As soon as the flitting shadow had melted into the gloom I slipped off the porch and investigated.

My half-formed suspicion was confirmed. The eavesdropper's footprints were quite distinct. He had crouched directly under the chairs which the adventuress and I had occupied.

I did not retire until an hour later. An indescribable feeling of dread had, though for no adequate reason, begun to weigh upon my spirits and to nag my nerves.

The first faint glimmer of dawn was in the east when something touched me softly on the shoulder. I remembered that I had left my porch window open,

and sprang up in a sudden flurry of alarm, but my nerves slackened quickly when the intruder, a black Jamaican, showed me his watchman's badge.

The old negro was afraid something had happened. He had heard stealthy footfalls upstairs, and somebody's bedroom door was wide open. On looking into the room he had seen—!

But at this point in his story he choked, overcome. He was an excitable and superstitious old black at best, but now he was fairly beside himself with a terror for which he had no explanation. The occupant of the room, I surmised, had gone out on the porch, properly enough, to smoke an early morning cigar. But the old watchman would not be reassured until I consented to accompany him up to the second floor.

I noted, as we advanced along the corridor, that a door stood ajar. I tapped tentatively. No answer. I repeated the summons, louder. Still no answer. I walked in.

The moonlight that flooded the porch outside filtered in, subdued, through the lace-curtained windows. It revealed a bed. In the center of the bed was the figure of a woman—all in snow white save a single dark-hued covering of some sort which sprawled across the full bosom.

A nameless something made me fumble rather hurriedly for the electric switch. The bright light showed what I had dreaded, almost expected. The dark-colored garment was not a garment at all. It was blood.

It dyed the white bosom repellently and, still welling from its fountain, was fast forming a ragged little pool on the bedcovering. Fair over the victim's heart, the ornamented stag-horn handle of a heavy hunting-knife, none of the blade visible, stood up like a sinister monument, somehow increasingly familiar to my gaze; and after an instant's reflection I could have sworn—so plainly did my eyes visualize the motive for this horror—that I beheld a single word scrawled in crimson along the mottled staghorn handle:

"VENGEANCE!"