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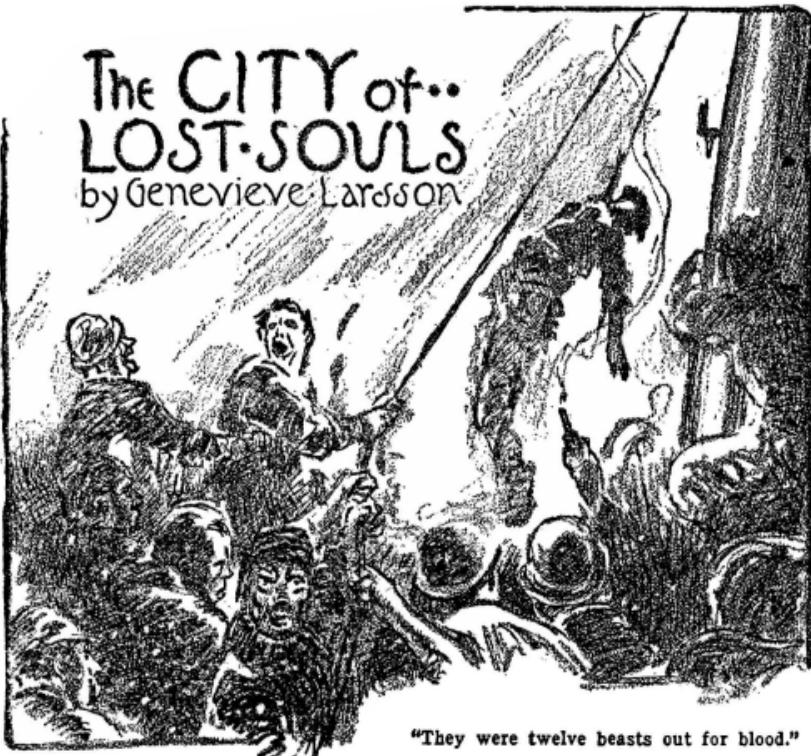
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# The CITY of.. LOST SOULS

by Genevieve Larsson



"They were twelve beasts out for blood."

THE train, snaking its way through the snowdrifts of the Colorado plains, seemed to Jack Renshaw to be entirely unheated. He was frozen through. Back a short distance, while the train was stalled, his glow of anticipation at being so near his friends had dulled. He wished he had a drink of whisky. But that would soon be supplied, he mused—trust the old gang for that! He'd been a fool not to send word he was coming. What a rousing welcome there would have been for him! Ten years he'd waited to return, ten years of grinding toil in the mines of Arizona, before he'd struck it rich. It would be great sport surprizing all of them, the Terrible Thirteen, as they'd called themselves in the old days.

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They'd be at Pryor's, or down at Nell's. He knew their haunts. Queer, how sure one could feel of certain people, even after a lapse of ten years, even after ten years of silence on both sides. "Wish I were as sure of heaven!" he thought.

There'd be Dan, roaring and funny as ever, boozing out poetry in his strong, ringing voice, and lighting cigarettes with twenty-dollar bills in honor of Jack's homecoming, in honor of their friendship restored. For they had quarreled, Dan and Jack, over Nell, the scarlet woman of the town. "What difference does it make what she's done?" Dan had boomed. "It's what she is that counts. And look at me. I'm not such a prize!" But the quarrel wouldn't matter now;

Jack knew he'd been right, and Dan would have found it out long ago. How Dan, the superior one in the group, could have taken a woman of that sort seriously, Jack could not understand.

In the midst of these musings, irrelevant pictures, too, flashed into his mind. That time in the saloon in the back of Pryor's Hotel, when they'd got the German farmer Giesling to fight with his neighbor—what a fight that had been! Curious, that he should remember this now; he hadn't thought of it in years. Other pictures, quick-flaming, quick-receding, came and went, gay, carefree, full of the spirit of the West, vivid with life and color.

Renshaw was roused from his thoughts by the conductor stopping at his seat. "You—get off here!" he asked hesitatingly.

"Sure do—it's my old town!" brightened Jack. Then, as the man did not seem inclined to bestow the praise Jack had expected, he added, "Some town, too, believe me!"

The conductor looked at him narrowly. "Yeh, some town," he agreed, a sardonic glinting look in his eyes.

Jack felt insulted by the tone and manner. "I ought to know!" he snapped.

The train was slackening down. He lifted his overcoat from the red plush seat, and slipped it on.

Jack was surprised that no one else was getting off. Instead of the blaze of lights he had somehow expected to see, a heavier darkness descended upon the outside world.

The conductor leaned forward, looking furtively out the window. "Lights off again!" he muttered. He glanced up at Jack. "How long since you been here?"

"Ten years," answered Jack coldly. "But it's the same town, I'll wager. Nothing could ever change the spirit of this place!"

He snatched his suitcase and made for the door.

"Good luck to you!" remarked the conductor. "Pity you chose *this* night to come back."

Jack did not answer. He was cold with fury and the fact that, in spite of himself, the man's words roused in him a distinct feeling of apprehension. As he stepped down, the conductor gave the information, "The next train through is the *Midnight Flyer*. It doesn't stop here ordinarily, but you can flag it."

THE train puffed on, as if in a hurry to leave. It left Renshaw in a darkness that was sinister in its heaviness. It seeped into his veins, chilling him still more. A sickly yellow light flickered from the window of the station house. As he turned at the end of the platform, the wind rushed, shrieking, around the telephone pole that rose like a pale ghost in the blackness.

He pulled the collar up more closely about his neck. He was grateful that in a few minutes he'd reach his friends. What an awful thing it would be, left desolate, on a night like this! He set off down the street. He'd stop at Pryor's, first. A clear vision of his friend Pryor rose before him, warming him. Pryor, the dispenser of joy. Past hilarity in Pryor's back room cheered him momentarily.

All of a sudden, as if unprepared for, unpremeditated, snow began to fall. There was something uncanny about it. This was too cold a night for snow. It was almost as if the elements were playing a trick on him. It whirled about Jack, and the suddenness of the stinging flakes blinded him. The wind tore at the ends of his long coat, whipping it about his legs. There was a tone of anger in it, a high note of defiance.

The houses he passed were completely black, no sign of light anywhere. But now the snow began lighting the way a little, so that he could see. Or was it the snow, giving out this queer half-twilight, this spec-

tral yellowish glow! The trees along the street, though bare of outline, had about them now gray-white veils that draped them into ghostly shapes, from which at the sides protruded angry black arms. A feeling of utter desolation descended upon Jack Renshaw. He resented that there were no lights, wondering, savagely, why the residents did not resort to candles, or lamps. Ten-thirty, and the whole town seemed dead, buried in narcotic sleep. And for Jack's company, the shrieking wind, which he had always hated. It did things to him, with its skirling claws, and its tearing voice.

A weird, unearthly noise startled him. The air was suddenly surcharged with an insidious, potent atmosphere of lust and brutality. He was brought up rigid, the blood running cold in his veins. The noise grew louder, more insistent. It was like nothing he had ever heard. Rather like the sound one might hear in a nightmare, like the demoniacal screaming of lost souls. He peered down the street, numb with cold and an indefinable terror.

The flakes of snow were coming more thickly now, in fine, stinging sprays. He wiped away clusters of them on his glasses. He peered again, straining his eyesight to see.

A white procession was coming up the street, figures made white from their coat of snow, terrifying in their grotesqueness. Jack bent forward, leaning against a tree, shaken and weak. Who, in the name of the Lord, were these creatures, rising as from a bottomless pit of blackness, to invade the world on some mission of destruction?

There was about the men a distorted dignity; their bodies were knit for action, emanations of lust and brutality issued from them like a heavy fetor. Their eyes were shrouded, their heads lowered, like gnus. Swirling about them, and over them, and clinging tenaciously to them, were veils that gave the impression of winding-

sheets. Ghoulish, unyielding, bent toward some hideous and awful deed, they approached him.

He tried to call to them, but either they did not hear, or no strength was left in his voice, for they heeded him not. He struggled to continue on his way, but he remained rooted, powerless to move. As they came nearer, he made out guns, belligerently drawn, that the figures were carrying. Their faces, what he could see of them with their shrouded eyes in the sickening yellowish light, were ghastly. With a wild throb at his heart, he recognized something familiar about them. The shape of a head here, a gesture there. Surely—surely that was—Steffins!

He peered closer, throwing out his hand in an entreating movement. "Steffins!" he cried. But his voice was lost in the unearthly noise issuing from the procession, and his hand fell back limp against him. Steffins passed on, unknowing, his body set toward some determined goal.

THE wind blew a cloud of white over Jack's eyes, and as he wiped it off he made out other familiar figures, several of the old devil-may-care gang to which he had belonged, the gang that had been the terror and pride of the city before he left. He called to them, loudly, he thought. There was no answer. He stood, leaning against the tree, held by an intangible, menacing fear. Had the cold numbed his mind as well as his body, he wondered?

How swiftly they sped, almost as if they did not touch the ground! They seemed to expand, to fill all space, then be blotted out again. His eyes hurt from the strain. How long had he stood there, and would he ever again be able to move? Then, as he looked, he was startled out of his benumbed state. For there was Dan, bringing up the rear of the procession, stumbling after the rest with

halting, clumsy, bewildered steps. Jack made a last desperate effort.

"Dan!" he called, using all his voice, and found himself surprised when Dan stopped. "Dan!" he cried again, with more assurance, his heart pounding madly.

Dan approached him, still in that uncertain way, one hand brushing his face as if to wipe away a terrible sight.

"What on earth, Dan, what on earth are they doing?" asked Jack, clutching at the arm of his old friend, his eyes fixed on the moving procession.

"Then—you see them, too?" asked Dan, in a hopeless, dead voice, a voice that Jack would never have recognized.

"See them? Good God, Dan, why shouldn't I see them? What's wrong with you?"

Under his hand he felt Dan's arm tremble violently, as if a spasm had passed over his whole body. He looked down, and saw how stooped Dan was, how broken and aged he looked. Pity stabbed through him. He flung one arm about Dan's shoulders, and turned him away from the fleeing figures.

"Come, old scout, let's get to the hotel."

Jack supported him as they walked on. At the corner near the hotel he spoke, raspingly, "No, not over there, Jack. Let's go—"

"But I wanted to see Pryor tonight."

"No, not now. We—we better go down to Nell's." His voice was cut off by a violent fit of coughing.

"But—"

"That's all right," said Dan, steadily. "Nell doesn't hold any grudge."

"She won out, evidently." Jack could not repress the words.

"Yes, she won out," Dan answered.

They walked in silence through the main section of the city, out to the far edge of town, where Nell's bungalow

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stood. Jack remembered it as cleanly painted, with green, cool shutters, and always at night merry voices ringing from behind closed doors. . . . At Dan's knock, a disheveled, weary-looking woman, the shadow of the former Nell, opened the door. All her attention was instantly centered on Dan.

"You came back!" she cried, putting her hands up to his shoulders. "How are you, Dan? How do you feel?"

"Here's Jack Renshaw," he answered.

She looked at Jack as though her mind were not on him. Her face assumed an expression of apathy. She started to withdraw.

"Won't—won't you shake hands with me, Nell?" Jack asked.

"Sure." She held out a thin, blue-veined hand. "What did you come back for?" she asked then, suspiciously.

"Why, to see all of you, but from—"

"Bring us a whisky," Dan choked, sinking into a dilapidated chair, staring out from empty eyes at the break room.

Jack looked quickly at him, and saw how warped and yellow his face was, how withered and sunken the eyes that had been so gay.

Nell moved about eagerly waiting on him, getting glasses, pouring out whisky with hands that trembled.

"You should have stayed where you were—you shouldn't have come back," she said to Jack, sullenly, as she handed him the drink.

"Nell, what's the matter? What's come over you two? What's come over the whole—darn town?" he asked, quivering with foreboding.

She started to reply, and Dan said, quickly, "You go to your room, Nell. I want to talk—to Jack."

"You—you're not going to—to tell him?" Her voice, cracked, falsetto, quavered.

"Go on out," said Dan.

Her skirts trailed over the bare floor as she made for her room. She turned at the door with a last beseeching look at Dan. Her hair stuck out, wispy and tousled, about her forehead. Then her eyes lighted with a look of eloquent devotion, suffusing her whole face. At that instant she reminded Jack of the old Nell, only that the loveliness which now touched her was softened, less arrogant, more of the spirit. The bleak room brightened momentarily.

"You'll call me—if you need me, Dan!" she asked humbly.

"All right, Nell," he answered.

Something in the quality of his voice caused Jack to look up, searchingly, and it seemed to him that Dan had responded to her.

"Good Lord," he thought, "he's still in love with—that."

When the door had closed behind her, Jack turned. "Now then, whatever it is, tell me quickly! I can't stand this much longer."

DAN put his hands to his throat as if choking, half pulled the kerchief from his neck. The flickering gaslight fell over him, and Jack felt, with an inner divination, the terrific struggle he was going through. Dan fumblingly adjusted the kerchief again, his shoulders hunched over with the fit of coughing that shook him.

"You're sick, Dan. You're all in. Here, drink this whisky."

Dan gulped down the whisky that Jack handed him.

"Don't tell it, Dan—if—"

"It's got to be told," Dan answered, and with a violent effort began his story.

"You remember, Jack, how we were—in the old days. How we used to run things. The Terrible Thirteen. Went about like knights of old, righting wrongs, and all that sort of thing. Caroused about, but when anything struck us as wrong, we took things—into our own hands. Re-

member how I used to joke about the slogan, 'Live clean, right wrong, follow the Christ, the King'? Only I thought *myself* the king to be followed! That's what—I really meant by it—"

"Rats!" said Jack. "You were always—"

"You remember Giesling, the German farmer two miles north of town?" Dan spoke thickly, the words coming out in mumbled syllables. Jack had a fleeting vision of the arrogant Dan he'd known, lighting cigarettes with twenty-dollar bills, hating anything underhanded, gambling cleanly, running the others. This was but the caricature of the man he had been.

"Giesling? Why, yes, I thought tonight of that fight we staged between him and Sharper. He was always fussing with his neighbor over the water rights—"

"That's the one," Dan interrupted. "Ten years ago tonight is—when it happened. You'd been gone—only a short time. It was a stormy night like this—with a stiff norther blowing across the plains. Enough to chill your bones. Giesling and his wife were getting ready for bed. There was a queer sound at the door. They thought at first it was a rat gnawing somewhere. It kept on, scratching—fumbling. Giesling went to the door—opened it. There stood a stranger. He was—chilled through—had been wandering about for days. His clothing was thin and frayed. His eyes were wild, peculiar—"

Dan stopped, drank more whisky, went on in a stronger voice.

"He asked for food and shelter. Giesling, you remember, wouldn't take a sick dog in—didn't believe in feeding tramps. Not much like Nell, eh? Remember her gathering in the stray cats, and feeding them? Oh, well." He stared ahead for a moment, a softened expression passing over his face. "Giesling told the tramp to get out. The man got down on his knees,

tried to worm his way into the house. 'Hungry—hungry—hungry,' he kept saying. He begged, in the name of Christ, to come in. A starved, shivering animal he was, with barely enough on—to cover him. He cried, and the tears froze on his face. Giesling's wife fought for him; she wanted to take him in—and feed him. He wouldn't let her, but finally—he said the stranger could sleep in the stable. They went to bed, and he kept nagging at her, saying that if anything happened she'd be to blame. He kept on worrying for fear the tramp would set fire to the barn. 'I ought to've sent him over to Sharpner's,' he said. 'As if he would do anything for him!' his wife answered. There was a flare of light—on their window, and he jumped out of bed. The haystack was on fire. Giesling cursed, got into his clothes. He was so furious, his wife thought he would leap at her. He rushed down to the fire. She waited. . . . He didn't come back—"

There was a pause, and as Jack leaned forward, he noticed Dan's face contorted out of all semblance to his former self.

"Go on," he urged. "He didn't come back!"

"She waited for some time, more afraid of her husband than of the stranger. Then she put some clothes on—and went down—"

"Well?" questioned Jack, breathless.

"Giesling lay sprawled on the ground, the stranger over him—his face at Giesling's throat. . . . She screamed, and the tramp got up—blood around his mouth. 'Warm,' he said, smiling at her, 'warm.' "

"Good God!" breathed Jack. "He—he—"

"He held a pocket-knife, dripping, in his hand. Giesling—was dead. His wife ran back to the house. She tried to reach town—by telephone, but the storm had played the devil with the wires. She ran all the way in, through that blizzard. The news

spread like wildfire through the city. Some of the gang—were at Pryor's—some at their homes—"

"You mean—our gang?"

"It was work for them, don't you see? All the more because they'd always hated Giesling. I was down hero—at Nell's. The boys came here—"

He struggled with his breath, his face like crumpled dusty paper. Desperately he seized the bottle on the table and drank great drafts. Some color ran into his cheeks.

"You know how gay we were—how quick to settle things. The gang came for me—"

"Well? You went, I hope?"

"Nell begged for the man. 'Give him a chance,' she said. 'You've got to give him a chance! You're in no condition to judge anybody!' she told us."

"You mean you let *her* interfere? You let her tell you what to do?" Jack's voice was full of contempt.

Dan did not answer the question, but went on:

**T**HE mob got to Giesling's too late. The sheriff had beat them to it. He had put the prisoner in the ramshackle jail here, until he could get him out to the next town. You can imagine how wild the boys were, how hell-bent that he should not be smuggled out. Here was their kind of a case! There were no two ways about an affair like this!"

"I should think not!" Jack flared.

"You can imagine how their lust grew as they marched back to town, and through the street to the jail. They overpowered the sheriff and deputies. The lights were out, and they lit matches to see. The prisoner blew them out. He talked some strange jargon they didn't understand. He laughed at them as they were breaking the bars of his cell—laughed in a queer, demented way, as though he had a good joke on them. They lost their reason, or what was left of it. They dragged him over to

the telephone pole at the depot, twelve men against one, and the storm beating around them—beating and shrieking and swirling around them—twelve beasts, out for blood...."

"Good for them!" Jack broke forth. "They weren't cowards!" he added, his voice like brittle glass.

Pryor was close to the stranger, and he noticed the stain—around his mouth. He struck him on the mouth—you remember Pryor's fists? Huge, iron fists. The stranger fell back against Steffins; Steffins caught him and set him on his feet. His lips were bleeding. 'Have you no heart?' he cried, with tears rolling out of his eyes. And Steffins answered, 'I'll cut yours out of your miserable body.' Would have done it, too, only the mob wasn't going to be cheated. The stranger started to laugh again, this time softly—a purring sound that made your brain reel. The ringleader grabbed him and shook him. 'Have you anything to say?' he asked, and the prisoner answered, 'The Lord will reward you men.' The wild look was gone from his eyes. The ringleader gave the order for the noose to be slipped over his head. Then the man began, in the quietest voice—to say—the Lord's prayer. 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come—' The ringleader pulled the rope and up he swung. They might have let him finish the prayer—might have let him finish—" Dan's voice droned on, over and over.

"As though that made any difference!" cried Jack. "He deserved what he got, if anyone ever did. I'm glad they didn't weaken—I'm proud of them. Wish to God I'd been there. He was just clever, thinking to play—"

"The next day the sheriff cut him down, and found a number inside his vest," Dan went on, regardless of the interruption. He was an escaped lunatic—"

"My God!" whispered Jack. A

palpable silence fell, while Jack saw, vividly before him, the lonely, demented creature driven by the storm, driven to his death by the angry mob. "Not—not responsible for his deed. Hungry—to the point of drinking—no clothing, no food—wandering for days.... And who is to know what deviltry that bull-headed German played on him before he finally killed—"

"He didn't kill Giesling," Dan cut in, in a throttled voice. "Sharpner, dying, confessed two years later. He had turned the stranger out, himself, before he'd sent him over to Giesling's. Then he followed him, and carried out his diabolical scheme. He set fire to the haystack, and when the German rushed out, as he expected him to, Sharpner killed him. He gave the knife to the stranger, and said, 'You're hungry. Well, drink this!' The stranger did as he was told. Then Sharpner sneaked back to his home."

Jack sat immovable, immersed in the tragedy as it poured from Dan's lips.

"The gang never confessed," he continued, each word an effort. "The officers could get nothing on them. You see they had covered their eyes.... No, they never confessed.... And though people suspected, they didn't know definitely, at least not at first. As time went on, things got from bad to worse. Pryor was the first to go.... Something happened to his mouth—his teeth fell out—he couldn't speak for months before he died—"

A low moan of pain escaped from Jack. The clock on the mantel above his head ticked on, as though it were taking him toward some definite, relentless end.

"Steffins—was the next. A train—got him. I never could see—how his heart—could be wrenched—from—"

"Oh God!" cried Jack, shuddering away from the picture.

"You can guess what it did to the rest," Dan's voice, thickening, strangling, went on. "They slunk about, expecting the worst—more dead than alive. It got them all——"

"All, Dan, every one of them?" It was a cry, twisted fearfully from Jack.

"And they never confessed—none ever confessed. A sort of pledge among them, a flimsy garment of bravado worn by each. The ring-leader is left—the one who pulled the rope—left him dangling with his breath cut off——"

Jack jerked himself back to a semblance of normalcy by a violent effort of his will. "What really got them," he said, trying to speak evenly, "was *fear*. And it's got you, Dan, brooding over their fate. We can't help them by that; but you—we've got to think of you! Thank God Nell *did* keep you from going that night! Thank God for that!"

Dan seemed not to hear. He glanced fearfully up at the clock. It was fifteen minutes of 12. "What hurts the most, Jack, is what we did to the town. If we had only stopped to think! We should have known he was—demented. Anybody would have known it, from what he'd done. Gloom hanging over the whole city now. Throughout the valley we're called the City of Lost Souls. Every—anniversary of that night they gather—a few more each year, as you saw them tonight. At midnight—they gather around the telephone pole. They adjust the rope, but the man who swung is—missing. I've seen it every year. No rest . . . no rest for them . . . no rest for the town. I thought by confessing——"

Jack leaned forward, clutching at Dan's shoulder. "Then—you did go? You were with them?"

Dan looked again at the clock. "I? Why, yes, I——"

Jack stifled the cry that rose to his lips. He found his voice, but it did not seem to be his voice at all.

"You're—sick with brooding, Dan. We'll go to Arizona. We'll get out at once——"

Dan did not notice, but went on, "You see this room, stripped? Remember how it used to look? Everything rich and fine, with the gifts the boys gave Nell. She's been taking care of me—the whole town's shunned us—guessed it, after a while. *She* never went back on me——"

"No, she wouldn't," said Jack soberly.

"I thought by confessing——"

"You'll have to buck up," Jack spoke sharply. "You're killing yourself with this superstition, Dan. It's—not like you. There's still time. You come with me tonight on the *Midnight Flyer*——"

Dan started to laugh. Hideous, strangled laughing. "The *Midnight Flyer*!" He choked over the words. Then he glanced up at Jack out of his faded, dead eyes. He pulled off the kerchief that bound his neck, bared his throat for Jack to see. Jack shrank away, appalled and unbelieving, before the sight.

"You see, I pulled the rope."

He stood up, and in a queer, strangled voice began mumbling something unintelligible. It filled Jack with a sense of impending doom. What was it—a prayer? Was Dan praying? Then, suddenly, as if the breath were jerked out of him, he doubled over and fell with a muffled, gasping cry, to the floor.

Jack leaped up, but before he could reach him, Nell entered and rushed to Dan's side. She lifted his head. It sagged against her breast. Over her desolate face passed a look of utter peace.

She looked up at Jack for an instant, and then flamed passionately, "Don't ever tell—what he said, tonight. I'll not have it known. Leave me—with my——"

The last word was lost to Jack, as she bent crooning over the inert body, cradling it to her heart.

THE Midnight Flyer slowed down at Jack's signal. He boarded it. The conductor was leaning against a window. He looked up, curiously inspecting the passenger.

"See anything?" he asked. "Out there—around the telephone pole?"

Jack bent forward to look. The

wind had died down. Snow was falling quietly, clean and white, coming down softly in great white wings, as if to cleanse the town forever from even the memory of scars.

"Queer," said the conductor, as the train ground on, "I could have sworn this was the night."

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