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*The Hero of This Story Had a Beautiful Dream
and a Rude Awakening*

THE MAN WHO OWNED THE WORLD

By FRANK OWEN

I MET John Rust by chance one evening in a by-street near Greenwich Village.

It was a miserable night, the air was extremely cold, and a choppy wind kept blowing against my face as though resentful of my presence. And now it commenced to rain, not sufficiently heavy to drive one from the street, yet disagreeable enough to make everything clammy and dismal.

But, despite the dreariness of the night, I loitered for a moment before a jewelry store window, probably because I simply cannot pass a window containing gems or pottery or old vases without pausing a moment. There was nothing in the window worthy of recounting, just a heterogeneous assortment of cheap rings, bracelets and gaudy beads almost valueless. Nevertheless, I tarried, and then it was that someone grabbed me by the arm, and as I turned around, the jewelry window, the storm, the cold, all were forgotten, for I was gazing into the face of John Rust.

He was so thin that the skin of his face seemed drawn over the raw bones without any intervening layer of flesh. His face was absolutely colorless, even his lips were blue-white. He had a straggly beard, yellow and vile-looking. Even without the enormous shapeless mouth and toothless gums, the beard was sufficient to make the face repulsive.

But it was the unnatural, fanatical light in his eyes which impressed itself most clearly on the screen of my memory. It was not human, but a glow such as might appear in the eyes of a maniac or a wild animal. His costume seemed made up of stray bits from the clothes of all the tramps of earth. And yet he carried a cane and kept swinging it about jauntily as though it were a thing of vast importance.

"You call those jewels!" he cried harshly in a voice made of falsetto notes. "Why, those are not even fit to be thrown to the swine which grovel in a thousand pens more than a mile from my castle. Come with me and I will show

you gems more wondrous than the Crown Jewels of Old Russia, more gorgeous than the collection of Cleopatra and more luxurious than the famed necklace of Helen of Troy. After you see my jewels you will laugh at what is obviously but a collection of baubles."

On the impulse of the moment, I said, "I will go with you, but before we go, I suggest that we have a bite to eat. You look hungry."

He shrugged his shoulders. "This day," he cried, "have I drunk three pearls melted in golden goblets of rarest wine. But if you wish to eat, I will go with you. All the restaurants near here are mine."

So we went to Messimo's Chop House and ate, but what we ate I cannot recall. As we passed out, John Rust grew quite angry because I paid the check.

"That was foolish," he stormed, "for did I not tell you I owned the restaurant. Tonight I want you to be my guest."

He led the way through a labyrinth of alleys and narrow streets.

"I live apart from the howling mobs," he told me, "so that my sleep will not be disturbed. Each morn I am awakened by a lad as lovely as Narcissus who plays an anthem of the Sun on a harp wrought of gold and platinum and set with a hundred and thirty-three pink diamonds. At the top of the harp is a single square blue diamond of forty carats, the finest in the world. It represents the Morning Star. The strings of the harp are the rays of the sun. The pink diamonds represent the individual kingdoms over which I reign."

As he spoke, we came to a hole in the ground, a filthy ancient cellar. I must confess that I had a twinge of terror as I followed John Rust down a flight of slippery stone steps, more treacherous and steep than the facade of Gibraltar.

Something, I know not what, scamp-ered across my feet and went screeching off into the blackness which engulfed us like the shadows in a tomb of recent death. I could hear John Rust fumbling about, and after an eternity of waiting, he struck a match and lighted a candle. As he did so, he cried:

"Behold, my treasure-chamber!"

By the dim light of the candle which made the silhouette of John Rust dance on the wall like the capering of a fiend, I glanced about me. The cellar was absolutely unfurnished, unless the cobwebs of a century can be classed as drapery. Down the stone steps the night rain dripped monotonously.

"Look!" fairly shrieked John Rust, "look at these diamonds, sapphires, carved jades, rare corals, tourmalenes, emeralds and gorgeous lapis lazuli! Has ever mortal man gazed on a finer collection than this? Here is more wealth than even Midas dreamed of. The Gaekwar of Baroda by comparison to me is without jewels; the Dalai Llama of Tibet is a pauper when the light of my wealth shines upon him. All the treasures of Rome are insignificant when held parallel to mine. The Incas of Peru owned less than I divide in a single year among the poor!"

He clutched at the bits of ashes, coal and pebbles which were falling through

his fingers, the wealth which the Gods had lavished on him so prodigiously.

"Tell me," he cried hoarsely, "are your eyes not blinded by the brilliance of my stones?"

"My surprise at what you tell me is acute," I declared truthfully. "I can scarcely find words to express my thoughts."

"Don't try," said John Rust grandly. "The greatest rhetoricians the world has ever known have never invented words even to suggest their true magnificence. . . . Nor is this treasure all I possess.

I own the world! Every castle of Rome or Venice is mine; every pasture of England, every moor of Scotland, every city in America, I own. Come," he ended abruptly, "come with me, and I will show you my private bath, a pool such as Mark Antony or the mighty Caesar never dreamed of."

It must be confessed that I sighed with relief as he led the way up the worn stone steps again. It was good to be out in the open air once more even though it was raining as heavily as when Noah set sail.

John Rust led the way back to Washington Square, to the fountain in the center of the park.

"This," he explained, "is my bath, shaded by myrtle trees and palms and in the heart of a grove where ten thousand song birds sing. Among the seven wonders of the world is nothing to equal this. I am better than Monte Cristo, for whereas he only boasted when he exclaimed, 'The world is mine!' I can prove my claim to it."

DURING the days that followed, I met John Rust several times, and although I cannot say that he remembered me, he nevertheless talked to me, which was really all he desired. He believed that all the people in the great city were his slaves and this misconception was the direct cause of his undoing.

While his eccentricities flowed in a harmless channel he was unmolested, but one day he struck one of his subjects with his scepter. The scepter was a strong oak cudgel and the subject in question was a huge, stalwart ice-man

who strenuously objected to being disciplined. He raised such a din that two policemen were necessary to quell his personal riot.

After chaos had ended, the ice-man continued on his rounds, but John Rust was detained until the police-patrol arrived. He believed it was a chariot of gold, that the crowd gathered around had come to envy Caesar, and so he climbed in as majestically as though he were about to proceed to the Coliseum as the supreme guest of the populace on a fete day.

In the course of weeks a great brain specialist, because he was interested in the case, examined John Rust and ascertained that he could be successfully normalized by a simple operation. He went on to explain about the pressure of a bone on some vital spot in the brain, the removal of which would insure the return of rationality.

The operation was successfully performed and eventually John Rust was turned out of the hospital a withered, broken old man, entirely cured.

He went back to his cellar. The first thing he intended doing was to sell his jewels and deposit the money in a reliable bank, for he still retained the memory of his jewels, although the hallucination that he owned the world was entirely blotted out of his memory.

So he returned to his cellar only to find heaps of worthless stones and ashes. He shrieked in his anguish. He had been robbed of all his jewels! For a moment it seemed doubtful that his new-found sanity could stand the surging flood of his ravings. All his enormous wealth had vanished like the essence of a dream. Now life contained nothing for him. He had neither relatives nor friends. He had lived in his dungeon for more than ten years. No one knew from whence he had come. For hours he sat, perhaps even days, moaning and wailing as awfully as any woman for a lost child.

Months later they found him dead one morning in his cellar, lying face downward in the ashes. He had died of grief, in abject poverty, this man who once had owned the world and had ten million slaves.

