

"The Fighting Trail"

Episode 4—"THE OTHER HALF."

"Father! Father!" she whispered, her throat closing on the words as she realized that Don Carlos had reached the end. Ybarra looked up at her and smiled bravely. His outstretched hand held a fluttering, bulky manuscript. The other envelope lay on the floor beside him. Then, as if exerting all his energy he spoke with quivering lips.

"Nan, dear," he said tenderly, "I am not your father. Don't let them get it—it's yours. Read this—read it, and know I loved you as my child. This is the story; it will explain."

Ybarra pushed the yellow papers into her hand and fell backward to the floor.

Nan and Gwyn gazed at each other for a moment with a look filled half with uncomprehending mystery and half with amazement. Ybarra's parting confession had so shocked and astounded her that she could find no words to voice her feelings. Gwyn, in the short time that he had known her, had naturally enough not learned the secrets of her heart. Moreover, the tense excitement had remained at such a high pitch ever since he had met her that he had not been able to study the girl. He could see, of course, that the revelation made by Ybarra as he was dying had thoroughly upset Nan but, as he had not learned exactly in what light she had looked upon her supposed father, he deemed it wisest not to speak until he knew her sentiments. The two looked down again at the manuscript before them. Gwyn held in his hand the second envelope, while they read:

"Dearly Beloved Nan:
"You will not read this until I have passed beyond either your blame or your approval. Although you will find I am not your father, I have tried to take his place, for I loved you as my own, both for my own sake and because I loved your mother.

"Years ago the death of my father placed me in possession of vast estates in Chihuahua, in Mexico. The main estate was composed chiefly of farm land from which I derived a large income. Among my most devoted servants was one whom you know, an Indian, Yaqui Joe. He was at that time and afterward a most loyal associate.

"While I was living on my estate there came to me one day an American, a Southerner, named George Wythe, who was seeking investment. He bore a letter from a friend of mine asking me to advise him. With him was only one person, his daughter Frances, a very beautiful girl of twenty years. Should you be curious as to

her features, you have but to look into the mirror. Upon my invitation Wythe and his daughter decided to remain at my home until they should be ready to return to the States.

"I was enthralled by the beauty and charm of Wythe's daughter. My devotion grew each time I spoke with her until I admitted that I loved her and was joyous when she told me that the love was returned.

"About this time a New York friend of mine, James Lawton, came on a visit. He was a rather wild youth whom I had not seen for some years, and was on a visit to Mexico. He decided also to stay with me. It was but a very short time before he let it be openly known that he, too, was in love with Frances. I paid little attention, however, feeling sure that my suit was safe.

"One evening, about a month after Lawton's arrival, he learned that Wythe's passion was gambling, and engaged him in a game of cards, at high stakes. I merely watched; I never gambled. The game was long and disastrous to Wythe. He lost all of the money which he had brought with him to invest.

"When I returned some time later I was astounded. The words that reached my ears as I entered the room struck as a mighty blow. I could scarcely believe they were true. Wythe was desperate. He had lost everything. Years of saving, hope of investment and a bright future—prospects of comfort in late years—all had vanished in a single evening. The crafty Lawton had made a daring proposition. He had offered to stake all that he had won—the thousands that had belonged to Wythe and that meant almost life itself to him—against permission to wed his daughter. The Southerner was indignant. He was insulted as indeed he had a right to be. But Lawton was clever, and he was smooth. He convinced Wythe that he loved his daughter and wished to marry her for that reason alone. I entered the room just in time to hear my friend say: 'All that I have won against your daughter in marriage—and one cast of the dice!' I held up my hand. 'Just a moment, gentlemen,' I said. 'If your daughter is for sale, Mr. Wythe, I shall buy her.' Lawton sneered. Wythe reddened. To a gentleman of his bearing the situation was past embarrassment. It would have appeared most utterly absurd had it not been so treacherously serious. It took fifteen minutes for them to attempt an explanation to me. I demanded, as host, to be permitted to play with

them. They could not refuse. Lawton counted what he had won, and I put up an equal amount. Wythe squirmed like a snake as he looked at the money and thought of his stake. We played—one cast of the dice for each man. Lawton won!

"The scene that followed was one to shudder at. In a civilized country, at a rich estate, it seemed too ridiculous for belief. Yet it was true; and its absurdity made it the more sorrowful. Lawton, having won everything made an offer. To this day I do not know whether it was a selfish or generous motive that incited it. He said he would return his monetary winnings if Wythe would induce Frances to consent to marry him. We all left the room.

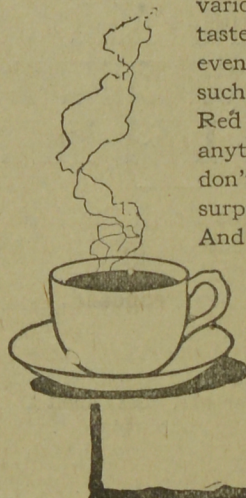
"Frances was on the veranda, crying. I was the first to reach her, but I said nothing of the game. When I attempted to approach her, however, she spurned me. I learned later that she had heard my offer to 'buy' her, and had not waited for the explanation. I naturally was despicable in her eyes.

"Wythe took her upstairs and pleaded with her. He told her that it was her desire that she agree to marry



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Lawton in order that a vast sum of money which he had lost gambling would be returned. If she refused, he said, they would both be driven to poverty and their lives ruined. She refused at first, but he pleaded and begged until she agreed. He did not tell her that she as well as the money had been gambled for. He was too proud for that.

"Frances was married to Lawton and shortly afterward Wythe died. I gave Lawton a half interest in my estate in order to keep them near me, for my love for his wife was still existent. Some time later I decided to (Continued on page 3.)

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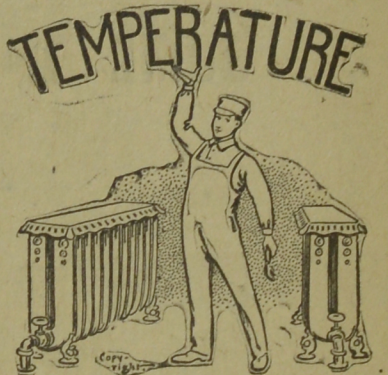
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