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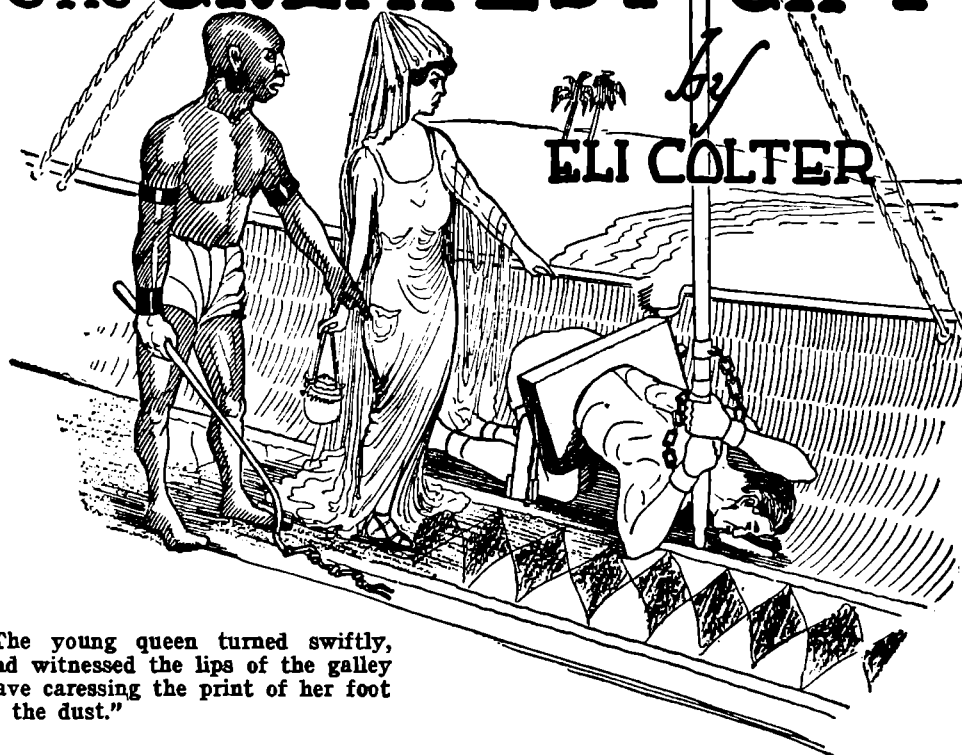
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The GREATEST GIFT



"The young queen turned swiftly, and witnessed the lips of the galley slave caressing the print of her foot in the dust."

OVER the face of the earth it was night, and in the soul of Lenore Andless it was night. But between the two nights there was a difference. The night that covered the earth was cool and dim, rippled with the intermittent songs of solitary birds, chased in a thousand lines of beaten silver by a great moon. The night in the soul of Lenore Andless was hard, black and hot with agony; there were no liquid sallies of melody from feathered throats to pierce the terrible silence; there was no moon.

She raised her drooped head to stare wordlessly into the face of the man who sat dumbly before her, then closed her eyes in a convulsive attempt to restrain futile tears; but the tears forced their way through her tight-shut lids and plashed upon her folded hands.

"Lenore—I'm sorry! What an asinine, weak, comfortless word—sorry! I'd give anything on earth if it wasn't like this. It's the wildest thing that ever happened on the crazy globe. I like you better than any woman I know. I'd hate like the devil not to see you again. But I don't love you. Why lie? And I can't love you. I've tried. That's the craziest part of it. I want to love you, I've tried, and I can't!"

"Don't, Tony!" The woman's face quivered and Antony Roe quickly turned away his eyes.

He rose to his feet and strode hastily to the window, where he stood rigid, staring out into the blue-white moonlight. He set his teeth savagely to control the tumultuous emotions raging within him. Three months before he had first seen Lenore Andless. From that time on he had known no

peace. They two had been drawn together by some involuntary attraction that held them as helpless as twigs drifting toward a whirlpool. He knew she had loved him instantly, but he had found himself unable to love in return.

Instead of love, he had swiftly become prey to emotions, urges and impulses that gripped him, dismayed him, frightened him till he felt himself shaken to the depths. He didn't flatter himself that he had ever been any parlor saint; he was no different from any other man of strong passions, ambitions and ideals. But the thing that had driven him since he first met Lenore Andless angered, stung and shamed him.

He knew he had hurt her to the quick; battered her sensitive spirit under the hammer-blows of hard, involuntary words. He had hated the words as he said them, and hated himself for being forced to speak them, yet he had been powerless to stay them. He had hard work staying his hands. He was conscious of the fact that he had *wanted* to hurt her, wanted to hurt her now. There had been times when he fought a wild desire to break her bones with his powerful fingers: breaking her heart with his denial of love was not enough. And again he had raged to beat her; to flog her with a cutting thong, to tear her flesh and see the crimson blood drip from her wounds. The manhood of which he had been not a little proud revolted at the horror which held him in a vise. He had determined he would conquer it, and found himself helpless.

Then he had tried to break loose from her, to get away and stay away. And he had found that effort as useless as the other. He was bound to her, bound by something more strong, more determined, more enduring than he. Weirdly, insensibly, he felt that it emanated from her. Possibly without her knowledge, possibly with-

out possessing the slightest intimation of it, she held him. Only *she* could release him. And even if she realized it, he felt sure that she loved him too desperately to let him go. He remained bound, helpless as a man trussed hand and foot. And as he remained, gradually but with ghastly certainty the wild ungodly impulses were riding him to a fall. He had come within the aura of the final foe—Fear.

He feared for what was happening to him. He feared for his own sanity. He was no longer Antony Roe. He was some unholy fiend, swayed and tortured by the drive of some nameless terror that threatened to batter down his resistance and make of him that hideous anomaly—a male human that is less than a man. He wondered if she too had come under the influence of those wild currents. He had withheld from her, as a matter of course, the feral thoughts that raced through his brain. He knew she had found him increasingly silent. He had caught her watching him when he dared not speak for fear of what he might say. He knew she had seen him clench his hands and walk away from her. Intuition *must* tell her that he was in an agony of mind to be gone from her vicinity—yet she held him and would not let him go.

“Tony—what’s the matter with us?” He felt her gaze on his back, but he did not move. Her voice rasped on raw strings down deep inside of him somewhere. “This is a wild, abnormal situation. What are we working out? What’s got us? Why can’t we beat it off?”

Beat—that word, *beat*. Roe wheeled from the window and walked toward her, his face white, his eyes half maniacal.

“I don’t know what’s got us, Lenore, but by God, something has!” He paused before her, his hands clenched at his sides. “Is there any

God ruling this universe? Ruling our lives and allowing mad currents to drive us to insane things? Is there any quality of mercy to help us through? Does He, does anybody, care what happens to us? Hell, no! We're only so many little ants crawling around on our little particular heap of dirt. If we go berserk and kill a few other ants, what does any God care? That much less work for Him—so many less ants for Him to bother about. So many——”

“Tony!” Lenore sprang to her feet and backed away from him, thrusting out her hands as though to ward off his words. “Tony—we're mad!”

“Yes—we're mad.” Roe shook from head to foot as he caught himself into control with racking effort. “I am, at least. That's the only explanation. And I am going now, before I do something that will haunt me to suicide.”

“Tony!” Lenore held out a pleading hand. “Tony—it may be forever!”

Roe caught her hand in both of his, and stood staring at her like a man straining his eyes through impenetrable blackness. In one split second he knew what life might have meant could he love this woman as she loved him—and knew he could not. With a smothered oath he dropped her hand, pushed her from him and rushed out the door.

FOR three hours after, Lenore Andrews knew pain. There are no words with which to designate what type of pain, nor to describe the pitch of agony through which she passed before she finally threw herself exhausted on her bed. Exhausted by the travail itself. Exhausted by her wild effort to burst from the chaos into a glimmer of understanding. She stilled her mind and deliberately tried to imagine the world—her world—without Antony Roe.

Hers was an intense nature. To her a thousand little things were conduit for delight or pain that to others were less than conduit for a slight smile or a trivial annoyance. To a hundred others what was the passing in and out, the casual association, of Antony Roe? The sound of his voice—and her pulse leaped. The step of his foot on the stair—and the air sang. The touch of his hand—and the world lived. He had left a little heap of cigarette ash on the shining mahogany table-top: she would have frowned at the act in another. But it was Antony who had done it this time. She swept the ashes off into her palm with an indulgent smile, and tossed them out the tall window to the breeze. Where his shoulder had leaned against the wall her hand lingered a moment as she passed. The world was no world without Antony Roe. There was no giving him up. Hold him she must, or living were a silly farce.

She drifted to sleep. She never knew when. It was a deep sleep, and with its first wings brushing her weary eyes she slipped into a mighty, poignant, unearthly dream. She found herself in a strange country, of flat rolling fields, checkered with groves in which great buildings reared mountain-high into the ether. As though drawn by some invisible, irresistible power, she turned automatically toward one massive structure standing in a towering grove of eucalypts. The pungent odor of the spicy buds filled the air as she drew nearer. As she approached the building itself she saw that the high entrance door was standing open. She walked up to it and stepped within.

She found herself in a mighty domed room, and the roof was arching and blue and dim—like the sky; and the walls were shimmering and incorporeal—like banked clouds. Then her eyes strayed down the room, at the far end of which she saw a

great, exquisitely carved alabaster throne. Upon the throne sat a man, watching her, evidently awaiting her coming. Still drawn by that invisible force, she walked onward till she stood before him and looked up into his face.

It was like no face she had ever visioned. It might have been carved from the same alabaster as the throne; it was so purely flawless, so unearthly in beauty. The wide, unwinking eyes, as deep as all mystery and as compassionate as a child's dream of God, were the color of a priceless sapphire in a pool in the shade. The silk-spun hair, rippling to his shoulders, was the shade of a ripe corn-tassel in the sun. His garment was as delicately toned as the new leaves on an apple tree in spring. And all about him there was a shimmering, gleaming, golden glow. Even his alabaster skin shone with the molten light, as though that light came from within.

He spoke: "All those who have reached the pinnacle of pain turn to me. I, too, was crucified." His voice startled her. It was cool, liquid, deep; like the sound of a great bell under fathoms of water. "We reach the pinnacle of pain by one road—the road of Karma." The golden light played over his face as he repeated, "*Karma*."

"But what is Karma?" The girl drew back, as though a chill wind had blown across her forehead.

"The Great Law of Readjustment. No more—no less." The voice of the Shining One was like the tone of a pipe in the wind. "Men come to earth young souls untried, unproved, born equal in the beginning. Each infant soul is given its share of strength, faith, love and hope. Every thought, every dream, every emotion man knows as he passes through life sends forth a thread of vibrating energy. As each thread spins out, each man weaves his pattern of love

or hate, mercy or vengeance, anger or pity, passion or pain. And he weaves also his future lives and his ultimate destiny. He comes back to earth again and again—with each life accruing something of attainment or failure, something of nobility or grossness. And death comes, and the body rots, and the soul goes into the higher planes to review the past life, to segregate the best from the experiences, to weigh the weakness and folly, to count the mistakes and heed the lessons learned. Then he is born again upon the earth, picks up the old trails and begins again. Every debt of act and deed must be paid over in double coin. And so it goes from life to life till the score is paid. And that—is Karma.

"But listen." The Shining One bent toward her, and his voice was as little silver chimes in a deep well. "There are times when, through some act of folly or cruelty in another life, the human finds things become too heavy for his soul's grace. And he may break. I grieve to see men break. I would that they should see, and trust, and fight through. So much is lost when humans break!" The voice of the Shining One was like the wail of a cello in the night in the rain. "But see! Evolution eliminates waste. You were near to breaking. I called you here that you might find faith, and strength, faith in the hour of misunderstanding. Mercy. Have you forgotten who died—for mercy?"

Mercy! What wild dream was this? Even in her sleep, Lenore remembered that Tony had cried out for mercy.

"There—see! There is the Curtain of Memory." The Shining One pointed to the far side of the room at the left, and Lenore turned her head. Across the wide space of the alabaster wall hung a great curtain of silver tissue. "Look back two thousand years, and remember." The

voice of the Shining One was like a temple bell on the top of a mountain.

ON THE silver curtain shifting shadows began to appear, assume form and color. Then before the girl's eyes grew a scene so like to life that the silver curtain faded and nothing was there but a wide flat river flowing sluggishly between sandy banks. Down the river, straight toward her, came a huge barge. It was decked in all the panoply of a royal house, shaded by striped awnings, propelled by thirty oars rising and falling rhythmically as one, each oar wielded by a slave chained in the galley to his bench.

On the silk-strewn and cushion-matted deck stood several women, waving fans, arranging pillows, striving constantly to insure the comfort of the young queen lolling indolently among them. As the barge came within the foreground the young queen pointed to a spot on the sandy bank.

"We shall pause there to rest. I hunger." Her voice came faintly, as from a great distance, yet clearly so that Lenore heard every word.

One of the serving women spoke sharply to a great black slave standing in the bow of the barge. He wheeled to call an order to the thirty white slaves at the oars. The nose of the barge swung slowly, the pace of the boat slackened, the young queen rose among her cushions and the barge touched the bank. The huge negro called to three others, and between them the four blacks raised a wide gangplank and carried it across to the low flat side of the boat where entrance and exit was made. They laid the plank from barge to bank and stepped back two on either side, arms folded across ebony chests.

The women lifted the young queen to her feet, filling their arms with silks and cushions to make for her a bed of ease on the sand, and waited

her bidding. She paused a moment, swaying gracefully on her slender sandaled feet. She yawned idly, one pink palm over her mouth. Then she walked slowly toward the gangplank, her women proceeding and following her.

The slaves in the galley bowed their heads that they might not see her face as she passed. Near the cut-in exit-way one white slave sat so near, holding aloft his oar, head upon his breast, that he could have reached out and touched her as she passed. For an instant his eyes flashed up at her, and in them was the look of a man who had worshiped the sun, hopelessly, from afar. Then he dropped his gaze. None had seen the look. In the lap of the meandering current the barge lurched. The young queen swayed and stumbled, her foot missed the velvet carpet spread for her and she caught at the galley stanchion to steady herself. The white slave winced and caught his breath, but he did not move. The young queen caught her balance, replaced her foot upon the velvet carpet and started to pass on.

But the eyes of the white slave had followed her foot as it stumbled, and where she stepped he saw that she had left the print of her sandaled foot in the dust at the edge of the galley stall. His body shook, he leaned swiftly and kissed the print of her heel. But as he did so the stanchion dug harshly into his side, and he caught his breath in a low exclamation of pain. The young queen turned as swiftly as he had bent, just in time to grasp the thing he had done—to witness the lips of a galley slave caressing the print of her foot in the dust. Her face went hard with anger, she drew herself to her slender height, turned to the slave nearest her and commanded:

"The scourge!"

Over the barge settled a silence, a void of shocked suspense. Scarcely breathing, the other slaves held their faces low, and the women stared in horror at the man who had dared to kiss the footprint of a queen. The negro to whom the queen had spoken crossed the deck to return with a long knotted whip in his powerful hands. The young queen pointed to the offender, commanding sharply:

"Twenty lashes! Twenty stripes across the back!"

The huge negro braced himself, the muscles of his arms bulged, the knotted thong swung high in the air, and as it whistled downward, stinging across the bare back of the galley slave, it cut the white flesh like a dull knife, leaving a crimson stripe in its wake. Again it rose and fell, and again, and yet again. The young queen stood watching coolly, counting the slow, brutal slashes. And her eyes were contemptuous, and her face was cold, and her red lips moved as though she were savoring something sweet to the taste.

When she had counted twenty, the white slave was unconscious in his chains, his back one blood-sodden lacerated wound, and the ugly thong dripped crimson drops into the print of the sandal in the dust. The young queen issued a low command. The negro stooped, roughly seized the beaten man's chin in his hand and raised the fallen head that all might witness the humiliation of one who had dared kiss the footprint of a queen. Then there was visible for the first time the face of the flogged white slave.

"Tony!" Lenore cried, wincing in sharp pain. The young queen turned, starting as though she had heard, and Lenore Andless looked straight into her own features. "No!" The girl shivered, grasping at the arm of the Shining One. "No! I never did that to Antony!"

"Two thousand years ago," he an-

swered her, as the picture faded, leaving only the alabaster wall and a singing silence. "And being the first cruelty, it is the last to be paid—after the way of humans. And being the cruelty of Pride, it was wanton. Why will a soul be proud? Why will even a fool be proud—when God is not?" The voice of the Shining One was like the sighing of a harp-string in an utter void. "From conquered Pride comes Humility. Out of Pain is born Compassion. There is no royal road to peace—but only a stony path of the pilgrim's progress and atonement. When we have crossed the Hills of Pain, when we have returned to life in love all we took from it in selfish greed, when we have traversed the Pit of Darkness to find Faith and come out unafraid, when we have laid upon the altar of Renunciation the Greatest Gift—the score is paid. And what for you is the Greatest Gift? The Ultimate? The All? The most you have to offer Life?" The Shining One's face was a pitying mask, molded out of the sorrow of all the world.

"Antony!" Lenore shrank backward, whispering the word starkly. "Antony! Take everything else—but don't ask me to give up Antony!"

"I ask nothing. I *may not* ask!" The voice of the Shining One was like the thin picked notes of a mellow mandolin. "You must do as you will. But in only one way lies peace. Two thousand years ago you took from him love and the homage of his spirit—took it contemptuously, as the due mead of your royal station, and when it broke its bounds that others might see—you gave in return humiliation and pain. Is not the one course for you obvious?" His challenging voice was like a trumpet sounding the last rally.

"Lord—forgive!" Lenore raised her hands in supplication, but her cry was only a whisper in all space.

"From those whom we have wronged must we ask forgiveness." The voice of the Shining One was like the reed of a mighty organ rolling down through the corridors of Time. "To those from whom we have taken, must we make return. Two thousand years ago he was chained. He is still chained. The way is clear. Go in peace." The light that radiated from the Shining One grew to such blinding intensity that she cried out and hid her face.

THEN Lenore Andless suddenly awoke in her bed, and knew nothing of how she got there. She rose, turned on the light and paced the floor, recalling in detail her wild, strange dream. *Was it a dream?* Something hovered over her, close, like the thin threads of memory, reaching back into dead ages, and she felt the warm sun on her bare shoulders, the sway of a barge under her feet. It was no dream—the way *was* clear. She shivered in agony at the thought of seeing Antony Roe pass from her, yet in the resolve of renunciation and restitution came the steady calm of peace.

All through the rest of the night she paced the floor, readjusting her balance, growing used to the barren plane of life without Antony Roe. And when morning came, and the dawn broke in her window, she went and stood with her face to the light and knew that she had the strength to set him free. Strange now, to think she had ever been so narrow-souled as to want to hold him chained when he was in torment to go. She sighed, a little sigh of relief, the sigh of one grateful for the close of a terrible battle, went to the telephone on the wall and called him.

Strained and groping his voice came over the wire: "Yes? Lenore? What is it?"

"I want you to come here—for the last time. I have one thing to say to

you—and then I shall not ever see you again. Can you come immediately?"

"Immediately."

The telephone clicked in her ear, and she hung the receiver back in place, turned and walked into the other room where they had so often sat and talked. How to tell him? What to tell him? Dare she simply say that she had come to the conclusion that they were of more trouble to each other than they were pleasure, and he had best go his way? She caught herself, smiling grimly. The eternal female! Seeking to send him away from her baffled, hurt, obviously to himself the offender—to save her face and leave her right of woman-pride unmarred. Pride—Pride, mocking, futile—fighting the ignominious defeat of crying, "I was wrong. Forgive!"

One way, the Shining One had said. One way. One way to pass, to extend the Greatest Gift. Out of Conquered Pride—she began pacing the floor, setting her teeth on the flame of hot shame for the last hold of littleness. Then she heard his rap on the door, heard the door open, heard his step across the hall, heavily ascending the stairs, saw him throw open the door and come toward her. She stopped and stood very still. Barely three feet from her he halted, peering into her face. In her eyes there was an unearthly light. He did not know it, but it was the light of supreme sacrifice. Something in her face startled him.

"Antony—you are free." Her words startled him, yet even as they reached his ears he knew that he *was* free. "I shall not hold you any more. I did not know I was holding you. Go wherever you will—across the world—to the farthest planet. Nothing matters save that you find peace. But before you go, look back. Antony—*look back two thousand years—and forgive!*"

Roe did not move. His mind shook under her words, steadied, careened upward, searching through the fog of time. Something began to sing in his ears, like the humming sound of great wheels spinning in space. He felt like a man in a dream. Strange feelings and thoughts bore down on him. Remember? What? What was that upon his ankle? A chain. What was that falling from his hands? An oar. What was that whistling through the air? A bloody thong. What was that burning, biting, tearing his flesh? A knotted rope. What was that she had said? "Twenty stripes across the back."

He swayed on his feet, staring at the carpeted floor. But he saw no carpet and no twining design. His starting eyes saw only dust—dust—and the print of a sandaled foot.

"Antony—*can't* you forgive?"

What was it she had said? "Nothing mattered but that he find peace." Compassion for his cruelty now, humility for her own cruelty then, renunciation of the love that had meant better than life. Sacrifice seeking to bestow the greatest gift in atonement.

Roe lifted his head, staring into her face. His hands clenched at his sides. The sting of the lash across tortured flesh passed. And suddenly strife and terror were gone, and nothing remained but a strange sense of having at last attained what he had hungered for two thousand years. One step and she was in his arms. His voice was crying incoherently in her ears:

"My queen! There is nothing to forgive—*I love you.*"