

Out of the Depths

Robert W. Chambers

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Dust and wind had subsided, there seemed to be a hint of rain in the starless west.

Because the August evening had become oppressive, the club windows stood wide open as though gaping for the outer air. Rugs and curtains had been removed; an incandescent light or two accentuated the emptiness of the rooms; here and there shadowy servants prowled, gilt buttons sparkling through the obscurity, their footsteps on the bare floor intensifying the heavy quiet.

Into this week's-end void wandered young Shannon, drifting aimlessly from library to corridor, finally entering the long room where the portraits of dead governors smirked through the windows at the deserted avenue.

As his steps echoed on the rugless floor, a shadowy something detached itself from the depths of a padded armchair by the corner window, and a voice he recognized greeted him by name.

"You here, Harrod!" he exclaimed. "Thought you were at Bar Harbor."

"I was. I had business in town."

"Do you stay here long?"

"Not long," said Harrod slowly.

Shannon dropped into a chair with a yawn which ended in a groan.

"Of all God-forsaken places," he began, "a New York club in August."

Harrod touched an electric button, but no servant answered the call; and presently Shannon, sprawling in his chair, jabbed the button with the ferrule of his walking stick, and a servant took the order, repeating as though he had not understood: "Did you say two, sir?"

"With olives, dry," nodded Shannon irritably. They sat there in silence until the tinkle of ice aroused them, and— "Double luck to you," muttered Shannon; then, with a scarcely audible sigh: "Bring two more and bring a dinner card." And, turning to the older man: "You're dining, Harrod?"

"If you like."

A servant came and turned on an electric jet; Shannon scanned the card under the pale radiance, scribbled on the pad, and handed it to the servant.

"Did you put down my name?" asked Harrod curiously.

"No; you'll dine with me—if you don't mind."

"I don't mind—for this last time."

"Going away again?"

"Yes."

Shannon signed the blank and glanced up at his friend. "Are you well?" he asked abruptly.

Harrod, lying deep in his leather chair, nodded.

"Oh, you're rather white around the gills! We'll have another."

"I thought you had cut that out, Shannon."

"Cut what out?"

"Drinking."

"Well, I haven't," said Shannon sulkily, lifting his glass and throwing one knee over the other.

"The last time I saw you, you said you would cut it," observed Harrod.

"Well, what of it?"

"But you haven't?"

"No, my friend."

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"Can't you stop?"

"I could—now. To—morrow—I don't know; but I know well enough I couldn't day after to—morrow. And day after to—morrow I shall not care."

A short silence and Harrod said: "That's why I came back here."

"What?"

"To stop you."

Shannon regarded him in sullen amazement.

A servant announcing dinner brought them to their feet; together they walked out into the empty dining room and seated themselves by an open window.

Presently Shannon looked up with an impatient laugh.

"For Heaven's sake let's be cheerful, Harrod. If you knew how the damned town had got on my nerves."

"That's what I came back for, too," said Harrod with his strange white smile. "I knew the world was fighting you to the ropes."

"It is; here I stay on, day after day, on the faint chance of something doing." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Business is worse than dead; I can't hold on much longer. You're right; the world has hammered me to the ropes, and it will be down and out for me unless—"

"Unless you can borrow on your own terms?"

"Yes, but I can't."

"You are mistaken."

"Mistaken? Who will—"

"I will."

"You! Why, man, do you know how much I need? Do you know for how long I shall need it?"

Do you know what the chances are of my making good? You! Why, Harrod, I'd swamp you!

You can't afford—"

"I can afford anything—now."

Shannon stared. "You have struck something?"

"Something that puts me beyond want." He fumbled in his breast pocket, drew out a portfolio, and from the flat leather case he produced a numbered check bearing his signature, but not filled out.

"Tell them to bring pen and ink," he said.

Shannon, perplexed, signed to a waiter. When the ink was brought, Harrod motioned Shannon to take the pen. "Before I went to Bar Harbor," he said, "I had a certain sum—" He hesitated, mentioned this sum in a low voice, and asked Shannon to fill in the check for that amount. "Now blot it, pocket it, and use it," he added listlessly, looking out into the lamp-lighted street.

Shannon, whiter than his friend, stared at the bit of perforated yellow paper.

"I can't take it," he stammered; "my security is rotten, I tell you— "I want no security; I—I am beyond want," said Harrod. "Take it; I came back here for this— partly for this."

"Came back here to—to——help me!"

"To help you. Shannon, I had been a lonely man in life; I think you never realized how much your friendship has been to me. I had nobody— no intimacies. You never understood—you with all your friends—that I cared more for our casual companionship than for anything in the world."

Shannon bent his head. "I did not know it," he said.

Harrod raised his eyes and looked up at the starless sky; Shannon ate in silence; into his young face, already marred by dissipation, a strange light had come. And little by little order began to emerge from his whirling senses; he saw across an abyss a bridge glittering, and beyond that, beckoning to him through a white glory, all that his heart desired.

"I was at the ropes," he muttered; "how could you know it, Harrod? I—I never whined—"

"I know more than I did—yesterday," said Harrod, resting his pale face on one thin hand.

Shannon, nerves on edge, all aquiver, the blood racing through every vein, began to speak excitedly: "It's like a dream—one of the blessed sort—Harrod! Harrod!—the dreams I've had this last year! And I try—I try to understand what has happened—what you have done for me. I can't—I'm shaking all over, and I suppose I'm sitting here eating and drinking, but—"

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He touched his glass blindly; it tipped and crashed to the floor, the breaking froth of the wine hissing on the cloth.

"Harrod! Harrod! What sort of a man am I to deserve this of you? What can I do—"

"Keep your nerve—for one thing."

"I will!—you mean that!" touching the stem of the new glass, which the waiter had brought and was filling. He struck the glass till it rang out a clear, thrilling, crystalline note, then struck it more sharply. It splintered with a soft splashing crash. "Is that all?" he laughed.

"No, not all."

"What more will you let me do?"

"One thing more. Tell them to serve coffee below."

So they passed out of the dining room, through the deserted corridors, and descended the stairway to the lounging room. It was unlighted and empty; Shannon stepped back and the elder man passed him and took the corner chair by the window—the same seat where Shannon had first seen him sitting ten years before, and where he always looked to find him after the ending of a business day. And continuing his thoughts, the younger man spoke aloud impulsively: "I remember perfectly well how we met. Do you? You had just come back to town from Bar Harbor, and I saw you stroll in and seat yourself in that corner, and, because I was sitting next you, you asked if you might include me in your order—do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And I told you I was a new member here, and you pointed out the portraits of all those dead governors of the club, and told me what good fellows they had been. I found out later that you yourself were a governor of the club."

"Yes—I was."

Harrod's shadowy face swerved toward the window, his eyes resting on the familiar avenue, empty now save for the policeman opposite, and the ragged children of the poor. In August the high tide from the slums washes Fifth Avenue, stranding a gasping flotsam at the thresholds of the absent.

"And I remember, too, what you told me," continued Shannon.

"What?" said Harrod, turning noiselessly to confront his friend.

"About that child. Do you remember? That beautiful child you saw? Don't you remember that you told me how she used to leave her governess and talk to you on the rocks—"

"Yes," said Harrod. "That, too, is why I came back here to tell you the rest. For the evil days have come to her, Shannon, and the years draw nigh. Listen to me."

There was a silence; Shannon, mute and perplexed, set his coffee on the window sill and leaned back, flicking the ashes from his cigar; Harrod passed his hands slowly over his hollow temples: "Her parents are dead; she is not yet twenty; she is not equipped to support herself in life; and—she is beautiful. What chance has she, Shannon?"

The other was silent.

"What chance?" repeated Harrod. "And, when I tell you that she is unsuspecting, and that she reasons only with her heart, answer me—what chance has she with a man? For you know men, and so do I, Shannon, so do I."

"Who is she, Harrod?"

"The victim of divorced parents—awarded to her mother. Let her parents answer; they are answering now, Shannon. But their plea is no concern of yours. What concerns you is the living.

The child, grown to womanhood, is here, advertising for employment—here in New York, asking for a chance. What chance has she?"

"When did you learn this?" asked Shannon soberly.

"I learned it to-night—everything concerning her—to-night—an hour before I—I met you.

That is why I returned. Shannon, listen to me attentively; listen to every word I say. Do you remember a passing fancy you had this spring for a blue-eyed girl you met every morning on your way downtown? Do you remember that, as the days went on, little by little she came to return your glance?—then your smile?—then, at last, your greeting? And do you remember, once, that you told me about it in a moment of depression—told me that you were close to infatuation, that you believed her to be everything sweet and innocent, that you dared not drift any farther, knowing the chances and knowing the end—bitter unhappiness either way, whether in guilt or

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innocence—"

"I remember," said Shannon hoarsely. "But that is nor—cannot be—"

"That is the girl."

"Not the child you told me of—"

"Yes."

"How—when did you know—"

"To—night. I know more than that, Shannon. You will learn it later. Now ask me again, what it is that you may do."

"I ask it," said Shannon under his breath. "What am I to do?"

For a long while Harrod sat silent, staring out of the dark window; then, "It is time for us to go."

"You wish to go out?"

"Yes; we will walk together for a little while—as we did in the old days, Shannon—only a little while, for I must be going back."

"Where are you going, Harrod?"

But the elder man had already risen and moved toward the door; and Shannon picked up his hat and followed him out across the dusky lamp-lighted street.

Into the avenue they passed under the white, unsteady radiance of arc lights which drooped like huge lilies from stalks of bronze; here and there the front of some hotel lifted like a cliff, its window-pierced façade pulsating with yellow light, or a white marble mass, cold and burned out, spread a sea of shadow over the glimmering asphalt. At times the lighted lamps of cabs flashed in their faces; at times figures passed like spectres; but into the street where they were now turning were neither lamps nor people nor sound, nor any light, save, far in the obscure vista, a dull hint of lightning edging the west.

Twice Shannon had stopped, peering at Harrod, who neither halted nor slackened his steady, noiseless pace; and the younger man, hesitating, moved on again, quickening his steps to his friend's side.

"Where are—are you going?"

"Do you nor know?"

The color died out of Shannon's face; he spoke again, forming his words slowly with dry lips:

"Harrod, why—why do you come into this street—to—night? What do you know? How do you know? I tell you I—I cannot endure this—this tension—"

"She is enduring it."

"Good God!"

"Yes, God is good," said Harrod, turning his haggard face as they halted. "Answer me, Shannon, where are we going?"

"To—her. You know it! Harrod! Harrod! How did you know? I—I did not know myself until an hour before I met you; I had nor see her in weeks—I had not dared to—for all trust in self was dead. To—day, downtown, I faced the crash and saw across to—morrow the end of all. Then, in my journey hellward to—night, just at dusk, we passed each other, and before I understood what I had done we were side by side. And almost instantly—I don't know how—she seemed to sense the ruin before us both—for mine was heavy on my soul, Harrod, as I stood, measuring damnation with smiling eyes—at the brink of it, there. And she knew I was adrift at last."

He looked up at the house before him. "I said I would come. She neither assented nor denied me, nor asked a question. But in her eyes, Harrod, I saw what one sees in the eyes of children, and it stunned me. . . . What shall I do?"

"Go to her and look again," said Harrod. "That is what I have come to ask of you. Good—by."

He turned, his shadowy face drooping, and Shannon followed to the avenue. There, in the white outbreak of electric lamps, he saw Harrod again as he had always known him, a hint of a smile in his worn eyes, the well-shaped mouth edged with laughter, and he was saying: "It's all in a lifetime, Shannon—and more than you suspect—much more. You have nor told me her name yet?"

"I do nor know it."

"Ah, she will tell you if you ask! Say to her that I remember her there on the sea rocks. Say to her that I have searched for her always, but that it was only to—night I knew what to—morrow she shall know and you, Shannon, you, too, shall know. Good—by."

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"Harrod! wait. Don't—don't go—"

He turned and looked back at the younger man with that familiar gesture he knew so well.

It was final, and Shannon swung blindly on his heel and entered the street again, eyes raised to the high lighted window under which he had haired a moment before. Then he mounted the steps, groped in the vestibule for the illuminated number, and touched the electric knob. The door swung open noiselessly as he entered, closing behind him with a soft click.

Up he sped, mounting stair on stair, threading the narrow hallways, then upward again, until of a sudden she stood confronting him, bent forward, white hands tightening on the banisters.

Neither spoke. She straightened slowly, fingers relaxing from the polished rail. Over her shoulders he saw a lamplighted room, and she turned and looked backward at the threshold and covered her face with both hands.

"What is it?" he whispered, bending close to her. "Why do you tremble? You need nor. There is nothing in all the world you need fear. Look into my eyes. Even a child may read them now,"

Her hands fell from her face and their eyes met, and what she read in his, and he in hers, God knows, for she swayed where she stood, lids closing; yielding hands and lips and throat and hair.

She cried, too, later, her hands on his shoulders where he knelt beside her, holding him at arm's length from her fresh young face to search his for the menace she once had read there. But it was gone—that menace she had read and vaguely understood, and she cried a little more, one arm around his head pressed close to her side.

"From the very first—the first moment I saw you," he said under his breath, answering the question a quiver on her lips—lips divinely merciful, repeating the lovers' creed and the confession of faith for which, perhaps, all souls in love are shriven in the end.

"Naida! Naida!"—for he had learned her name and could nor have enough of it—"all that the world holds for me of good is here, circled by my arms. Nor mine the manhood to win our, alone—but there is a man who came to me to-night and stood sponsor for the falling soul within me.

"How he knew my peril and yours, God knows. But he came like Fate and held his buckler before me, and he led me here and set a flaming sword before your door—the door of the child he loved—there on the sea rocks ten years ago. Do you remember? He said you would. And he is no archangel—this man among men, this friend with whom, unknowing, I have this night wrestled face to face. His name is Harrod."

"My name!" She stood up straight and pale, within the circle of his arms; he rose, too, speechless, uncertain—then faced her, white and appalled.

She said: "He—he followed us to Bar Harbor. I was a child, I remember. I hid from my governess and talked with him on the rocks. Then we went away. I—I lost my father." Staring at her, his stiffening lips formed a word, but no sound came.

"Bring him to me!" she whispered. "How can he know I am here and stay away! Does he think I have forgotten? Does he think shame of me? Bring him to me!"

She caught his hands in hers and kissed them passionately; she framed his face in her small hands of a child and looked deep, deep into his eyes: "Oh, the happiness you have brought! I love you! You with whom I am to enter Paradise! Now bring him to me!"

Shaking, amazed, stunned in a whirl of happiness and doubt, he crept down the black stairway, feeling his way. The doors swung noiselessly; he was almost running when he turned into the avenue. The trail of white lights starred his path; the solitary street echoed his haste; and now he sprang into the wide doorway of the club, and as he passed, the desk clerk leaned forward, handing him a telegram. He took it, halted, breathing heavily, and asked for his friend.

"Mr. Harrod?" repeated the clerk. "Mr. Harrod has nor been here in a month, sir."

"What? I dined with Mr. Harrod here at eight o'clock!" he laughed.

"Sir? I—I beg your pardon, sir, but you dined here alone to-night—"

"Send for the steward!" broke in Shannon impatiently, slapping his open palm with the yellow envelope. The steward came, followed by the butler, and to a quick question from the desk clerk, replied: "Mr. Harrod has nor been in the club for six weeks."

"But I dined with Mr. Harrod at eight! Wilkins, did you nor serve us?"

"I served you, sir; you dined alone—" The butler hesitated, coughed discreetly; and the steward added: "You ordered for two, sir—"

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Something in the steward's troubled face silenced Shannon; the butler ventured: "Beg pardon, sir, but we—the waiters thought you might be—ill, seeing how you talked to yourself and called for ink to write upon the cloth and broke two glasses, laughing like—"

Shannon staggered, turning a ghastly visage from one to another. Then his dazed gaze centered upon the telegram crushed in his hand, and shaking from head to foot, he smoothed it out and opened the envelope.

But it was purely a matter of business; he was requested to come to Bar Harbor and identify a useless check, drawn to his order, and perhaps aid to identify the body of a drowned man in the morgue.