

Gordon Craig

Soldier of Fortune — by Randall Parrish



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(Continued)
"I am afraid you will not understand. You can scarcely appreciate how strictly I have been brought up as what such an unconventional meeting as this means to me. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"But are you?"
"Really I—I do not seem to be. It almost frightens me to realize I am not. I do not understand myself at all. Why should I talk thus frankly with you? Why feel confidence in the rules of my old life or of my nature. Such actions would shock those who know me. They ought to shock me. Am I in a dream from which I am going to awaken presently? Is that the explanation?"

"I shook my head.
"No. You have only been thrown against the real world. You find it not to be what you supposed. It is no cause for shame or regret. Womanhood lies deeper than any pretense of gentility. Men seldom fail to recognize this fact. Their lives of struggle compel them to, but a woman finds it hard to understand."

"To understand what?"
"How any man meeting her as I have you—in the street at night, under conditions society would frown at—can still feel for her a profound respect and pay her the deference which a gentleman must always extend to one he deems worthy."

"For a long moment she did not speak, but withdrew her hand from beneath mine, resting her chin in its palm.
"What is your name?" she asked finally.

"Gordon Craig."
The lashes dropped quickly, secretly shadowing the brown depths, the dust deepening on her cheeks. In the momentary hush that followed the waiter came shuffling forward with our order.

"I had never supposed I lacked audacity, yet I found it strangely difficult to again pick up our conversation. This woman puzzled me—was becoming an enigma. Her eyes again glanced up and met mine.
"It is a terrible experience being penniless and alone," she said with a shudder. "I can never concern some form of evil as I once did, for now I have felt temptation myself. I—I have even learned to doubt my own strength of character. I—I am glad I met you. I think you have saved me from myself."

"You asked me my name," I broke in eagerly. "Would you mind telling me who you are?"
"I?" The clear cheeks reddening. "Why, I am only a fool!"

"Then there is, at least, one tie between us. But if we are to remain friends I must know how to address you."
Her red lips parted doubtfully, her brow wrinkling as she spoke.

"Yes, and we cannot afford to be conventional, can we? I am Viola Bernard, and I must tell my story to some one. I can fight fate alone no longer. Perhaps I may not confess everything, for I do not know you well enough for that, but enough at least so you will no longer suspect that I—I am a bad woman."

"I could never really believe that."
"Oh, yes, you could. I have read in your face that my character puzzles you. You invited me to drink a cocktail to try me. Don't protest, for really I do not wonder at it or blame you in the least. How could you think otherwise? There is a home I could return to, and a mother, but they are more than a thousand miles from here. But I cannot go, even if I possessed — means, because of my pride—my false pride possibly. I have chosen my course and must abide by it to the end."

"She drew a long breath, speaking very slowly.
"It is a hard story to tell, for the wound is still fresh and hurts. I was upon the stage—not long, but with sufficient success so that I had become a leading woman with one of the best stock companies. It was against my mother's wish I entered the profession, and she has never become reconciled

to it, I had no will power left, no womanhood, no remorse. It was thus I came there to that corner. I heard the policeman approaching along the side street and, terrified, sprang into the yard to escape; then—then I met you."
"Tell me," I questioned earnestly, "what caused you to interpose between me and the officer?"
"What? Oh, I hardly know," a touch of hysteria in the nervous exclamation. "I was compelled to choose instantly between his mercy and yours. The difference seemed so small enough then, but—but I realized you were frightened also, and—and so I preferred to trust you. That was all. It was my fate, and—and, well, I didn't care much how it ended."

"But you endeavored to escape from me. You sought to compel my leaving you?"
She lifted her face again, flushing, saddened, slightly indignant, the brown eyes widening.
"Perhaps the soul was not all dead," she returned gravely. "Perhaps womanhood was not all gone. I did not know you. I was in terror. But now I am not afraid. I believe I have found a man—and a friend."

"I was conscious of a sudden wild throbbing of the heart, a swift rush of blood through my veins.
"I might have doubted that myself awhile ago," I acknowledged almost bitterly, "but now I am going to make good. Lord, how a fellow can run to seed when he lets himself go! Do you know you are helping me as much as I am you? You didn't find much out there—only a drunken discharged soldier, an ex-hobo with a laborer's job. I've wasted my chance in life and been an infernal fool. I can see that plain enough and despise myself for it. I knew it before you came. The difference was then I didn't care, while now I do. You have made me care. Yes, you have, girl," as she glanced up again, plainly startled by this unexpected avowal. "You see, you belong to my class, little girl, and—and you are the first of them to speak a kind word to me in five years. It's—it's a bit tough to be cut dead by your own class."

"It was her hand, white and slender, which reached shyly across the table and touched mine, but her eyes alone made answer.
"That is all right," I continued, my voice shaking. "I understand how you feel. But this is no fit place for your kind. You better go home to your mother."
She shook her head with decision. "Why not? Is she hard?"
"Yes. She would be very hard with me."
"Do you mean you would rather risk it here—with me than go back and face her?"
"Yes, even that," she replied soberly. "I have courage to fight it out here, but not there. I know what it will mean if I go back—reproaches, gossip, ostracism, all the petty meannesses of a small town. I loathe the very thought. I am strong again, and I will not go. It is between God and me, this decision—between God and me." She dropped her head, hiding her face upon her arms, her shoulders trembling. "You—you may despise me. You may think me the lowest of the low, but I—I am going to stay here."

"I sat in silence, amazed, puzzled, gazing across at her, my hands clenched.
"You actually mean you dare risk yourself here—with me?"
"With your help, with you as a friend to talk to—yes."
"But stop and think what I am," I urged recklessly. "A mere hobo."
"No," she said earnestly. "You are not that. You are a man."
For a long minute I did not answer, unable to determine what to do, how to act. We had both finished our meal, and there was no excuse for lingering longer at the table.
"You will go with me, then?"
"Yes."

(To Be Continued.)
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