

# Knute Ericson's Celebration

By Robert Alexander Wason

He was a big man with blue eyes—not china-blue, not baby-blue, but that peculiar blue which changes to steel or to green with the subtle flicker of hidden things, the eyes of the mystic—the eyes which really do see visions in a crystal globe; or in the sunset, the misty moonlight, or the luring vistas of an open fire.

And his hair was straight and tawny, though it flowed in rolling waves across his large head and sometimes tumbled upon his massive brow like rock-tossed spume. His jaw was strong with square chin, yet standing out free and clean from the corded column of his throat like the jaw of a fighting terrier. His lips were full enough to indicate a healthy animal-nature but having none of that flabby looseness which denotes a sluggish intellect. He was a large man and very powerful. Knute Ericson was the name of him and he was a rover. Companions he picked up as he felt the need of them, but friends he had none, for he was a foreigner to the world of to-day, and his ways were as strange to those he met as were their motives to him. When he sailed he was much given to standing in the bow of the vessel and gazing ahead into the tangled mess of the waves, humming weird tunes as the storm waxed stronger and the Viking blood of him harked back to the leapings of a shield-hung galley—blood-memory only, for he had no traditions.

When he drank, he drank to excess, and when he fought he fought for the mere fun of it, a joyous yielding to the lust of combat; or else, when the inherent sense of his simple justice was stirred and the red fire came to his blue eyes, he fought to kill, and it took four times his weight to drag him from his foe. Yet with all his hungry desires he was a temperate man, and possessed of an iron will which made self-control merely a matter of whim—whim in his case being but the frothy surface of a deeply ingrained code.

This night he had been paid off in San Francisco, and there was a dancing light back of his eyes, as he swung up Market Street with his pockets well lined and the tingling pleasure-instincts humming along his sound nerves—nothing to hold him, nothing to daunt him, no law but his own—and all the world to choose from.

He strolled along with his head back and an odd smile on his lips. The salt-thirst which had been banking up in him along the monotonous trail through the low, hot dunes of the Pacific, was still unslaked, and within the round tower of his throat, impish fingers were massaging the swallowing nerves, filling them with that sting of anticipation which foretold glorious thrills when at last he gave free rein.

A newsboy offered him a paper, but he brushed the boy aside as he would have brushed a troublesome insect. Individualism had met individualism, and the thin gamin cursed the big rover with hot fluency. Knute Ericson gazed down at the mite in surprised appreciation, and then gave a gleeful chuckle. He bought the boy's entire stock, held it a moment while he scrutinised it in amused contempt at the thought of a grown man wasting his time in reading of what others had done, while all about him stood a city of treasures for whoever chose to take them. Then he threw the papers aloft in a scattering cloud and laughed a low-toned, mellow laugh, like the booming of surf in a narrow-necked cove.

This was going to be a night on which he could often ruminate with undimmed satisfaction, when once more there would be no man-stained land in sight, and he would be rocking over the

deep with his blood-memories as a sub-bass and his fleeting recollections to carry the melody of an emotional obligato.

He turned into Kearney Street and followed it to Pacific, glancing in through the swinging doors of half a dozen saloons, sniffing the odours, swallowing the tempting water which gathered in his mouth, but nursing his strong thirst to still a higher potency. No anchorite, he, to deny himself the full feast of his sensations; no weakling, to gorge on fruit not yet come to the fullest bloom of ripeness.

Like a mischievous boy he teased the wolf of his appetite the while he spread his own feast of Tantalus; but openly he gloated because no chain bound him which he could not break when he would.

He materialized the sensations which would be his when the first bumper of strong liquor should ooze through his whole body; and those other sensations, when the soft, warm arms of the girl should clasp about his neck.

He had not yet even decided upon the type; in his slow, deliberate way, he had postponed visualising the girl herself, and was content with the tingling response his nature had given at the thought of the soft, warm arms which were to clasp him—after he had drunk enough to no longer care whether or not the morrow left him any money. Money was a small matter: he would still have his body, and there was always good pay for the labour power of such a body as his.

He crossed over and swaggered lightly through Chinatown, staring with good-natured contempt into the inscrutable faces of its inhabitants. He hoped they would take offence and try to mob him without forcing him to be the open aggressor. He had his own code in fighting, always preferring to fight on the defensive, and having a marked prejudice against firearms. Plain hands seemed to him the most consistent weapons, though he saw no impropriety in the use of knives, clubs, or convenient articles of furniture; but his indignation was always aroused at the thought of crowding out a soul through the small, sticky lips of a bullet wound.

A sign forbade whites from entering a dark alley; so he turned into it, hoping that some excuse would arise for the bumping of many smooth, saffron heads together; but the Celestials were as patient as himself, and jostle them as he would he could arouse no active resentment.

He went on to Dupont Street, shot at the targets, ridiculed the prowess of others, thrust his elbows carelessly into any faces showing a rudimentary belligerency, and generally indicated in a mild, knightly way that he was *en quest* and that any legitimate trouble would not be altogether unwelcome; but their discretion was not to be shaken, and he felt it was still too early to visit the localities where battle was always on tap for whosoever cared to crook his finger.

Finally he took his first drink, a small beer-glass of brandy. He swallowed slowly and gratefully, washing it about in his mouth and letting his palate take full toll. This was merely enough to heighten his zest, and his blue eyes were even more alert as he strolled down Grant Avenue to Market. It was still early and the throngs now on the street had planned for, their evening's amusement.

The type of girl which he was seeking did not bother with details in her planning; she spread a net and waited: she was a fisher of men, and Knute Ericson desired to be caught.

He was no hypocrite, he was too independent to resort to flattery—even flattery of the Deity—so he picked his path without subterfuge and walked with his head thrown back. He was not respectable; but on the other hand his self-respect was so firm and sound it had never threatened to slip beneath his feet and, despite his strenuous life, he had never once cringed.

The land is man's slave, and upon its body the scars of yesterday, and the welts of to-day, will in turn be covered by the lash of to-morrow; but there is no past and no future for the sea. It lives

forever in an endless day. Upon its face there is no brand of man's mastery, and so it concerns itself not with the changing codes of men; but whatever its mood and whatever its action, it gazes up open and fearless into the sky above; and as with the soul of the sea, so with the soul of Knute Ericson.

He turned up Geary and walked rapidly, simply because his surplus energy demanded an outlet. The houses were much alike, crouching close to the street, huddled shoulder to shoulder, and with short flights of steps leading from the front doors to the sidewalk. Few people were passing, and so he had a clear view of her as she walked nervously toward him. When they were half a block apart, she faced about and slowly retraced her steps, while he also decreased his speed, and examined the woman with his keen sea-eyes.

She was slender with graceful carriage and attractive lines, and he at once became interested in her. He knew that she had come forth in search of a man, and he also knew that she had little relish for the quest. How he knew this he had no idea, for he was not given to analysis. His sensations were exact and his intuition almost equally so; but he had never sought explanation for his impulses or his convictions. He took himself as he took the sea.

He soon caught up with her and as he drew close to her side, she turned and glanced timidly into his face; after which her glance fell to the pavement. She had dark hair and large, dark eyes. Her face was very beautiful, and very sad; and it was the sadness which had given beauty to a face which had once been merely pretty. Knute Ericson sensed this and felt strangely ashamed. There was no reason for his feeling shame, so he shrugged his shoulders and asked: "Are you looking for some one?"

The woman did not look at him, but she nodded her head.

"Any one in particular?" he asked, bracing himself against the ebbing tide of his desires.

This time the woman shook her head, but drew a little apart from him toward the houses.

"Then will I do?" he asked, half hoping that she would say no, and leave him free to return to the swirl of the town where he could shake off this disquieting feeling of unearned shame; and once more be wafted by the breeze of his own recklessness.

"As well as another—if you have money," replied the woman contemptuously; but this time she looked him full in the face and held her eyes steady.

Her steadfast gaze aroused in Knute Ericson's breast an excitement different from any which had ever before burned there. He felt that he could do much for this woman, and yet something held him back. He did not draw closer to her, he felt no impulse to touch her; but neither had he any intention of deserting this new type of adventure.

"Have you a room?" he asked.

"Yes, it is only a block from here," she replied shortly as she quickened her pace.

They spoke no further, and probably no two persons were farther apart in all happy-go-lucky San Francisco, than these twain as they walked silently side by side. But a few inches of clear, bracing air separated them, yet it seemed a solid wall of ice.

The woman turned into a hallway from which also opened the side door to a small, corner saloon, and as they started up the dimly lighted stairway an angry discussion over a card game floated out to them. She hurried to the far end of the upper hall, and with a smothered gasp opened a door and stepped inside.

He followed and waited in the dark until she could light the gas; but instead she locked the door, and crossing the room seated herself upon the bed whose outline was vaguely visible in the rays which filtered in from the street-light on the corner. He felt very helpless as he stood watching her, and when she sighed, he also sighed in uncomprehending sympathy.

“Well?” she asked, after a long pause.

Without answering he moved over to the window and took a seat in the low rocker which stood there. The noise of a scuffle in the next room came to him, and for a moment he listened to the angry voices of a man and woman, quarrelling over money. When the quarrelling ceased, he leaned toward her and asked in a low tone:

“How long you been in this business?”

“Business!” repeated the woman bitterly. “I have not been in it, yet.”

“Then why start?” he asked bluntly. “You stand not much chance to succeed. You take away from a man that which you ought to arouse.”

“I shall get hardened in time, I shall learn the game; but now it seems horrible, beastly.”

The man shifted uneasily in his seat.

“Can’t you get other work?”

“I have tried other work, I have supported myself for months; but first one thing and then another—Oh, there is no use! I have tried, but I have been beaten. No”—her voice was decisive—“I have to earn money some way, and this way seems the surest. As you say, it is business. If I put it off any longer my clothes will look worse, and I can’t make as much money. I want the money.”

Her words were harsh; yet something back of the words made it very plain to Knute Ericson that the woman herself was not harsh, but fiercely tender. He wondered why she needed the money, but without asking, he arose and lighted the gas. He examined the room and the woman, and both were shabby but both were clean. She appeared to be about twenty-five, and as his eyes fell upon her worn, trembling hands, that odd sense of intangible responsibility returned to him, and with it a fierce desire came upon him to take up her battle.

He was not of the stuff of which investigating committees are made; he felt no call to fix blame or find excuse; he knew that the profession in which the woman was about to engage was older even than his own, and he had no delusions about it.

There was not a trace of sociology in his considerations; he did not feel the slightest contempt for the girls who sold their bodies, even as he sold his in another way when he placed his name upon a ship’s articles. It was merely one of Fate’s grim jests that on this night of his celebration, a bit of merchandise should appeal to him as a woman, and call forth from its depths his elemental manhood.

He was troubled because this woman had been wronged, and he was puzzled as to why his usually placid conscience should insist upon taking its own unwarranted share of the blame. In the marts of the world a man bought what was offered for sale, provided it suited his fancy and he had the price to pay; and this was all so reasonable that he was irritated to have a feeling of perfidy suddenly thrust upon himself. Doubtless some other man was at the bottom of her trouble, but this was no reason why such a rover as he should pick up responsibility which had not been thrust upon him. He looked into the woman’s eyes, and felt the sway of them throughout his being.

“How much money do you need?” he asked.

The woman looked into his eyes—they were steel, now—and a wistful half-smile came to her face. Then she shook her head.

“It would be no use, it would merely postpone; and I might never be able to make myself take this step again.”

Knute noticed the music in her voice, now that it had softened, and he also appreciated her choice of words. He had some taste in words, his ear was discriminating, and he had cultivated this because he had once admired the wreck of a man who had been a scholar.

“Would fifty dollars help you out?” he asked.

The woman breathed rapidly for a few moments; but before she could reply quick footsteps hurried down the hall and with them came the sound of incoherent sobbing. The man paid no heed to it, any sound was consistent with such a place; but his companion gave a startled gasp and flew to the door, which she unlocked and threw wide. A woman staggered into the room bearing in her arms the naked form of a two-year-old boy. The eyes of the child were closed and the mouth drooped pathetically; the hair was dripping wet.

The woman of the street seized the child, pressed it to her bosom, kissed the pale lips, and demanded fiercely:

“What is it, what is the matter—tell me what is wrong?”

The other woman was of heavier build, her features were coarse but kind, and now with bent elbows, hands opening and closing just above her shoulders, and her voice moaning brokenly, she was again proving that no matter how thick the callous spots may become, the parts below always remain tender.

“I don’t know how it happened,” she cried. “He was asleep on me bed, and I had just filled a tub to put some clothes to soak when Mrs. Flannigan called me to the door to tell me about Micky. I only went to the corner with her, but when I came back he was in the tub, and I couldn’t bring him to. I rubbed him and rolled him; but oh, God—I couldn’t bring him to!”

The mother placed the child upon the bed in terrible calmness, there was even the trace of a triumphant smile upon her lips.

“There is nothing to hold me now,” she murmured in a tone of relief as she stood looking down at the marble form. “Ah, baby, baby, you didn’t ask it of me after all! Sleep gently, little babe, mother is coming. Mother will be with you soon.”

She had forgotten the others, and why not—she had also forgotten the world which held them. Love comes with giving, and in giving herself, such love had come to her as those pampered women who are only mothers by proxy, never, never can know. For months this mother had borne a crushing cross up a heavy hill. She had given with love, she had given her all, but she had still fallen short of meeting the needs of her child; and now at the top of her hill with the cross securely planted, a great freedom had come to her. All the useless struggle was behind and below her, and during the few remaining hours of anguish, she would be apart from the world and could say as from a great height, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Knute Ericson had stood in the shadow of the tawdry curtains, his huge frame as rigid as a block of stone. He could not understand the change in the woman, for he was elemental, he stood squarely upon the earth and met physical force with physical force. To stand upon a martyr’s grave and to say meekly, “Oh, Death, where is thy sting?” would have seemed to him but a cowardly subterfuge.

It suddenly occurred to him that in spite of its location, this was his field, and he stepped to the bed and thrust the mother to one side. She looked into his face, saw the new light there, and ceased to resist him. He was at ease now, this was work fitted to his hands. Whoever works skilfully works gracefully, and in spite of her warring emotions, the woman watched him with an odd fascination.

With quick, sure movements—gentle in spite of his ponderous strength—he emptied the lungs of water, he worked the tiny arms, he fairly forced a renewed respiration; and in a short time an

outraged wail burst from the child's lips—humanity's customary protest against assuming or resuming the responsibilities of existence.

Then, half-mechanically the mother took towels and rubbed the child briskly, comforting him the while with cooings and caresses. Slipping a clean gown upon him she placed him next to the wall, and stroked his little back. Soon he fell asleep, for faith is a heritage rather than an acquisition, and neither danger to body nor to soul can rob a child of its sleep.

Then the face of the mother fell into the crook of her arm, and she lay beside the child, silent and prostrate from reaction. Knute Ericson motioned the other woman to leave the room, and closed the door after her as one having authority. The ancient patience of the sea was his, and he stolidly resumed his seat by the window to await what was still to come.

After a time the woman roused herself to again sit upon the edge of the bed, and to look at the man with steady but weary eyes.

"I cannot thank you," she said. "It would have been so much easier just to follow after. Now—now—"

"Now," he took the word from her lip, while his lower jaw hardened as it did when the fighting began to press, "now, I, myself, have some say in this matter—and I am a man."

She did not speak; there was nothing to say.

"Who is the father of this child?" he asked.

For answer she opened the top drawer of her bureau and showed him her marriage certificate. She also showed him the photograph of a flashily dressed man, a man with a weak, cruel face; but whose small curled moustaches indicated supreme self-satisfaction.

"This creature," said the woman scornfully.

Knute gazed upon the pictured face and a hot fury gathered in his breast. No need for him to match feature against feature; the very soul of the degenerate stood naked before him, and his fist clenched with slow, crushing force as he pictured how it had gloated in petty tyranny as it had heaped humiliation upon the clean soul of the woman. The grip of his fist tightened until the nails bit into the horny palm of his hand.

"Where is he, now?" he asked quietly. The sea is quiet, strangely quiet and it is generally most quiet when the storm forces are gathering.

"I do not know; but I think I have seen him twice lately. I think he is watching me."

"Yes, that would be his way," murmured Knute Ericson thoughtfully. "How did you happen to marry *him*?"

"I have asked myself that same question a thousand times—I am no longer able to answer it. When I married him I loved him, or I was insane; I cannot tell which. I lived in a small town and we were comfortable. He spent a few weeks there—Oh, it all seems like strangers in a different world when I look back upon it!

"My mother never liked him, but I fell in love with him and married him. We went to live in New York, and even after I found, he was a crook and a gambler, I loved him. He had to leave New York, and we came here, but the gang would not let him in, and"—she paused a moment, and then her voice grew hard—"he finally told me I had to go on the street. When I refused he threatened. But I could not do it. I was willing to work or to starve—but I could not do that. When his debts began to meet him at every turn, he simply ran away and left me to face it.

"I tried to work for the child, but I could not find the right place. It was a constant struggle to keep my lips above water, until the real waters of the Bay began to coax and beckon to me. At night,, especially at night, when the floating filth could not be seen, the dark waters in the shadow of the dock seemed like soft satin, and I could hear gentle voices murmuring and

pleading with me. I went there first by accident and then I went to be soothed, until it was all I could do to keep out of the waters—the waters which pleaded and promised and coaxed at me.”

Her voice had become tense, and Knute nodded his head knowingly.

“Ah, I know the waters,” he said, his deep voice at last finding the simple note of friendship in this topic of mutual interest. “The waters paint pictures and tell stories and sing songs; but it is only the dirty dock-waters that coax you to give up and die. Out in the open the spray is kicked out before the dancing toe of a vessel until, in the sunlight, it becomes like baby rainbows at play, or, in the moonlight, like the thin veil between our own world and the other. Out there the waters tell only of life. Things have I seen down there in the split of the waves that never on shore has any man ever seen—but they have never coaxed me to die. To fight, yes. To scorn death, yes. But to give up and die—Oh, no, no, no. That is but the lies of the dirty, dead waters about a dock.”

The woman’s eyes had brightened while listening to him, but they grew dull again as she went on with her story.

“There must have been some place for me if I could but have found it; but I could not find it. They were good to me, these other women who have found their hard, narrow places, they kept my child for me when they could, they shared their little with me; hut they measured me with sure eyes, and one and all they whispered that it would have to be the street in the end; and that the sooner I went the better chance I’d stand. I really did not care for myself; but for the child”—she turned and looked at the little face, rosy and beautiful in sleep, and then broke into a dry sob—“I could do anything, anything for the child.”

Knute Ericson had nervously shifted his position several times as the woman finished, and now he pointed a huge finger at the marriage certificate, and asked with childlike simplicity:

“That paper, now, don’t that guarantee you something—a living, or protection for the child, or something?”

The woman was more sophisticated than the man, yet she too was but a lonely child lost in the world’s grey tangle, and the hopelessness of torturing questions long unanswered was in her eyes as she slowly shook her head.

Knute recalled that he had made no comment upon her story.

“You were taking the proper step,” he said heartily. “For the child it was right, anything is right for a child; but for this—this—” His voice died away to a guttural hiss as he looked at the photograph, and again his hand clenched slowly.

There was nothing academic about Knute Ericson, he knew little of history and had no pet theories to exploit. He was merely one of the primitive, elemental men who serve as the storage-batteries of power, who lead their simple lives in obscurity until a civilisation begins to corrode from the twin acids of senseless wealth and senseless poverty, and the rusty bands of individual morality snap one after another.

Knute Ericson lived by race morality, caring little for method and less for dogma; but insisting upon results. Deep in his heart, but all unconscious to himself, had been graven the general order: “Thy woman must have a song in her heart, and merriment must dance in the eyes of thy child.”

So long as individual morality provided these conditions, he had no quarrel with it; but when the heart of the one woman who had stirred the very depths of him, was echoing with the hollow mockery of a persecution she could not understand, and the life-thread of the baby she loved had become the clanging chain which bound her to her galley-bench, he was not first compelled to plough out a matted tangle of long-cherished forms and prejudices before he could consider this

one case according to the justice which spoke to him in the free and unrestrained voice of his own instinct.

The elemental men are not master workmen, they are merely instruments, storage batteries, dynamos and sharp-cutting tools; and an instrument has but little need of philosophy. Rugged manhood is the steel of which these primitive instruments are formed, race morality is the temper, the cutting edge is of simple courage which will not dull or turn even at the granite wall of death; and they are driven by that stored-up vital life-principle which they gather day by day from the surplus of nature with which they are in such close harmony.

They change not according to the fashions of men; philosophies and religions come and go, but they still hear the song and sing the song which all men sang before ever the art of speech had been invented. They do not work by plan, for they are instruments; yet whenever degeneracy stifles the song in the hearts of too many women and puts hungry suspicion into the eyes of too many children, then do the primitive chisels begin to cut, and every institution which has become foul and infected is removed before the cutting is done. Let man build for the ages if he will, but let him remember this in his building: race-morality is the master-law of the world, and individual morality can only survive when it is in accord with it.

Knute remained silent for a long time while picture after picture unrolled before him, and then he began to speak in a low voice, his eyes on the floor.

“When I was a baby my father died and my mother married again. We lived in the wheat district of Minnesota. My stepfather beat me, for each little thing he beat me; and yet I worked harder than ever before did any boy work. When there was not work to be done at home, he rented me out, beating me each time I returned and taking all my wages. It was upon the farm of my own father that this man lived, and yet he beat me like a dog and like a slave. Often my mother would fight for me, and then he would beat her, too.

“When I was fourteen, I was big like a man; so I tried to kill him. Before I could finish, my mother dragged me away and begged me to leave. I sailed on the lakes first and then on the ocean, on all the oceans. I never went back; because my mother did not want me to kill him and I could not understand it. I have looked down into the waters of all the oceans, and have seen him lying there upon the ground with his face covered with blood where I had struck him with my club. I never felt sorry for this; I always burned to keep on striking and striking until you could not tell it had ever been the face of a man!

“I have never abused a child or a woman, I never could. I have thought of many things, always, but most I wondered why I sailed where I sailed, for I never cared. Now I know—I was sailing to you. I shall take you as my woman, and your child shall be my son, my own son. I have much softness in my heart, he shall have it all. Once when the schooner went ashore in a gale on Lake Erie, I saw the green winter-wheat hiding under the snow. This is the way that the softness in my heart has been kept alive, and he shall have it all. Oh, it is very plain why I have been sailing this way and that about the world. It was not at all of an accident, it was just that I might be on that street this night, to be the real father of your little boy.”

His voice was low and steady with an undercurrent of calm assurance; and as she listened the woman studied his face and a light of hope came to her eyes as she reached behind her and touched the child gently; but she shuddered as the gaunt hand of Individual Morality reached out of the gloom and rested upon her shoulder.

“No, it cannot be,” she said, shaking her head. “I should trust you, but—”

“I do not ask you to be as a wife to me,” he said with an instinctive delicacy almost inconsistent in a male human. “I shall leave you my money—I have over three hundred dollars—

and I shall go to sea again. I shall sail as a mate from now on and learn navigation. I know much of it already; and I can work hard, with my mind as well as with my body, when I wish. The child shall be your child and my child, but you shall be free until such time as you wish to be my woman. I am of a very great patience.”

“Yes, but I am already the wife of another,” said the woman sadly.

“Oh, yes, of this rat,” he rejoined, looking down at the photograph. “Then I shall not go to sea. I shall take a small farm or truck patch, and you can cook for me. When I was a boy I could work eighteen hours a day with hate in my heart. Now, I can work twenty for the boy and for you. After I have met the rat you will be free to marry me or not, just as you please.”

The woman breathed rapidly. It seemed like the coming true of one of those dimly whispered dreams which, as an antidote, had come to her with the coaxing voices of the Bay, bidding her wait and hope and fight just a little longer. This was not like life, this setting aside of laws and customs, simply because they were grinding up the souls of one woman and one child. She felt confidence in the strength and gentleness of this great blond man who had come sailing to her across all the seven seas; and she felt something more, but just what this was she could not know.

She could not know that the nerves of an individual reach back without a break along the stem of evolution to the primitive roots of the race itself; to that ancient time when it was respectable and modest for a woman to select as her mate the man who could protect her child—and so she was filled with wonder and with doubt.

The man had made his plea, the woman was considering it; and so they sat silent. It was late, and the rest of the human warren and the street outside were also still. In this silence, heavy with doubt and hope, there came a single footstep at the head of the stair. The face of the woman turned white and her hands clasped upon her breast. The eyes of the man were upon the face of the woman, and his face changed with hers; but he did not move from his seat by the window, she did not move from her seat on the bed; and thus they waited while the stealthy steps crept closer to the door.

At last the door was flung wide, and the man they had both been awaiting, stepped in, closed the door, and locked it. He glanced at the large man whose stolid features now appeared heavy and vacant; and then with malignant triumph, he glared at the woman, his woman.

“I’ve caught you at last, huh?” he sneered. “You who were too good, you who would rather die first! How long have you been at this?”

The clasped hands of the woman had fallen to her lap and her whole body drooped. She noted the similarity of the question to the one Knute Ericson had asked her long ago, long, long ago; and in a dull, vague way she wondered why the question did not pain her as much coming from the lips of the man who was her husband under the law, as it had when asked by an utter stranger. She did not answer the question, or even look at the questioner.

“How much money you got?” asked the husband brutally. “You’re my wife, don’t forget that; and it’s going to take a fair bit of cash to square things with me.”

“Air you vera dronk?” asked Knute Ericson in a slow drawl.

The husband turned and looked into the innocent blue eyes, gazing at him mildly from out the large, meek face; and he became very angry. He had been drinking, but not to excess.

“Look here, square head,” he snarled, “you’d better keep your trap closed. Do you know what I can hang on you for being caught in a room with my wife?”

“No,” drawled Knute, shaking his head seriously, “Ay do nit know. Vat could you hang on me?”

“I could have you sent to the pen if I wanted to, or I could shoot you, and any jury in the land would clear me. A wife can’t testify against her husband even if she wants to, and the unwritten law would be all I’d need in this case.”

A look of fear had flashed across Knute’s face at the threat of shooting, and at sight of this the woman on the bed had straightened with a look of surprised disgust. Then she settled back once more into the lassitude of hopelessness.

“Ay tenk Ay viLL go,” said Knute, rising to his feet.

“No, you won’t,” threatened the husband, drawing a revolver from his pocket. “It’s going to cost you something to get out of this. How much money you got?”

“Ay have tree hunert toiler,” replied Knute, sinking into his seat and gazing fixedly at the revolver.

“Get it out,” commanded the man, his eyes glittering avariciously.

“Vill you let me go, den?”

“Yes, I’ll let you off this time.”

“And ta voman—vat of her?”

“That’s none of your damned business. Hand over the money.”

The husband stepped closer, keeping the revolver carefully pointed at Knute, and the big man trembled awkwardly as he pulled some loose change from his pocket and handed it over with a heavy sigh. He next fumbled in an inner vest pocket, and pulled out a sack of gold pieces which he regarded sadly. The husband reached and snatched it. “Give it to me,” he snapped.

As the bag of gold was seized, the left hand of the big sailor shot out and gripped the wrist which had allowed the revolver to waver.

“Ay tenk Ay sall take ta gun,” he drawled even more slowly.

The husband drew back his free hand to strike, but this also was seized at the wrist. The primitive man was now smiling like a pleased child, the face of the civilised parasite was wrinkling into lines of pain.

“Do not make any noise,” said Knute Ericson, dropping his accent, but still speaking slowly, “and lay the gun ve-ry softly upon the carpet. I not like to fool with guns.”

The husband could feel the bones of his wrist grinding together, and he leaned forward as requested, and laid the revolver on the carpet. Knute gently pushed the weapon to the wall with his foot; after which he crossed the man’s wrists and held them in one of his hands, while he felt for additional arms with the other.

“Now, listen,” he said calmly, as soon as he had satisfied himself that the man was unarmed, “we do not wish any noise. If you make even enough noise to waken the child, I pick you up and dash your head upon the floor. Like this—see?”

He suddenly clutched the man by coat-collar and ankle, raised him over his head, and swung him headfirst toward the floor. The man gave a smothered groan; but with a wrench which tore the cloth at the shoulder, Knute stopped him a few inches from the floor, straightened, and set him gently upon his feet.

“You do not weigh much, rat,” he said candidly, “and I am very strong.”

The man was trembling with fear and beads of sweat appeared upon his pallid forehead; his breath came in gasps.

“What are you going to do with me?” he faltered.

“Kill you, I hope,” grinned Knute Ericson. “You have been making laws for this woman; now she shall make laws for you.”

Both men turned to the woman, and upon each face was a question. An old, old drama was taking place in that tawdry room. Whenever woman is forced to hold the scales of justice, then it is a civilisation itself which is being weighed in the balance.

The woman sat with her child upon the bed behind her, her hands were clenched, and her mouth was hard and merciless. It was thus the women looked behind the barricades of Paris; had her mind been theatrical, she would have held forth her fist, thumb down. The child's life had been passed amid stormy scenes; he was not disturbed, and in the silence of the room his soft, regular breathing was plainly heard.

The woman spoke no word, and after a long moment of waiting, Knute Ericson stepped behind the victim, whom fear had made too limp to resist.

"First I shall punish you some for your evil ways," he said simply, "and then I shall twist your neck."

He seized the man's wrists and slowly twisted and bent them upward behind his back until the man was lifted from the floor; after which he shook him. The degenerate bit his lip until the blood came, the sweat rolled from his face, his eyes started from their sockets—but he made no sound, no sound but the gritting of tendon over joint.

"Oh, don't; it's too horrible!"

At the tone of horror in the woman's voice, Knute immediately lowered the man, whose knees could no longer support him and who crumpled to the floor. The woman was leaning forward, her hands clutching the bosom of her dress, her eyes wide with sympathetic dread. Knute Ericson regarded her in dumb amazement; it must be that all good women were this way, even as his own mother had been. The woman glanced at his face and read the inquiry:

"Oh, don't," she whispered hoarsely, "I can't stand it."

"What shall I do with him, then?" The question was naïve, childlike and full of wonder; for the question came from out the ancient innocence of the race itself.

"Don't let him hurt me again, don't let him hurt me, Mary!" pleaded the man, grovelling at her feet. "I'll come back to you again, I'll be good to you; only make him let me alone."

She did not even glance at him. It was the tender part of her own nature which she was instinctively guarding. What had once been her husband was now nothing but a wounded animal with an animal's capacity for physical suffering.

"Listen, rat," said Knute Ericson with his convincing simplicity, "I shall not kill you, this time; but it would be much better for you to die. I shall take this woman and this child to be my woman and my child. You know about laws and such things; see to it that the law is satisfied. Next time I see you, if the law has not made her a widow, I shall myself make her one."

He thrust the man contemptuously with his foot and turned to the woman. "Do you owe anything?" he asked.

"I owe fifty cents to the woman who cared for the baby. I had to borrow of her to buy milk."

"Give her this dollar," said Knute Ericson, "and then pack up what you want to take along."

She glanced at the child, took the bill, and left the room. Knute picked up the man and set him upon a chair with a jolt that shook the room.

"Rat," he confessed in a slightly disappointed tone, "so far as I know, I have never killed a man; but do you be very careful to keep out of my way after this. I do not like you."

He picked up the revolver, removed the cylinder, and with his great hands twisted barrel upon stock until the weapon was useless, after which he tossed it upon the bureau top. The eyes of the man had watched him in shuddering fascination, and Knute caught the glance.

"It is such hell-toys as that, that make rats like you dangerous," he said reprovingly.

The woman returned and put her small property into a suitcase and bundle. Then she dressed the baby, who was still so limp with sleep that even this did not awaken him. The husband sat in his chair like one dazed by a drug, his numb arms hanging like ropes from his shoulders. The woman did not look at him.

Knute Ericson lifted the child and kissed him tenderly on the cheek.

“You are no longer the son of a rat,” he said with proud dignity, as he held the child from him; “you are my son, and your quarrels are my quarrels before ever they are begun.”

Then he folded the child into the hollow of his great left arm, picked up bundle and suitcase with his right hand, and motioned the woman into the hall with a nod.

He stepped to the side of the man who was gazing at him with pale, squinting eyes, and said softly:

“You have a full month in which to satisfy the law, rat. After that I shall hunt for you. I do not want you to stay anywhere along this western coast.”

Out in the hall the woman was trying to make herself feel shame because she did not feel shame. She recalled her mother, her marriage vows, all and everything which should make her feel ashamed; but she could not feel it—she only felt freedom.

She had drunk of race morality, the stern morality which does not wink at subterfuge, but says: “Cover no rotting sores with fine linen, ye are not clean unless ye are clean to the very core.” She had drunk deep of this, and the draft had made her strong.

And she had at last found a man who would not regard her as a chattel but would stand as a buffer between her and the wolves and vultures. She was not able to reason about it, she could only lean confidently upon this new, sturdy faith which had come to her, and say with Ruth of old: “Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God.”

Knute came out into the hall bearing the child, and with downcast eyes she shut the door after them. She drew a full, deep breath as the door closed, it seemed also to close upon her dreary, hopeless past; and then she followed the man down the stairs and into the street—this stranger, whose name even she did not know.

Her wan face brightened with its first free smile in months as the child moved in its sleep, reached up a chubby arm, and encircled the man’s neck; but when the man leaned his cheek caressingly against the child’s head, her eyes filled with tears, happy, welcome tears.

Knute Ericson, the Earth-man, stood upon the sidewalk and looked into the woman’s eyes.

“Which way?” he asked.

Oh, it was the wine of life to her to be once more treated as an individual, to have her wishes consulted, to enjoy both the form and the spirit of freedom! The shattered tendrils of her prudery had sought on every side for shame, but instead, had found self-respect; she had reached desperately forth in the darkness to take her cross, and when she had drawn back her hand, lo, it had held a crown; her own body had been given back into her own keeping, and this great, blond man had come out of the night and out of the ages, to guard it for her. The glory of a free soul, raised for the first time above the reek of prejudice and daring to look without fear and without apology into the face of its Maker, was upon her; and she marvelled at the currents of new life which swept through her.

Knute Ericson continued to look into her face, and something of awe came to him at the white peace which glowed like pure fire upon it.

“Which way?” he repeated in yet a softer voice.

“Any way at all, and I shall follow,” she answered, and her eyes met his, as the eyes of the first woman met the eyes of the first man; and neither was afraid.