

# The Noxious Gift

## The Long Arm of Mannister, #1

by Edward Phillips Oppenheim, 1866-1946

Published: 1907  
in »The Cosmopolitan«



Illustration:

Her head dropped almost to her hands... „I promise, „ she murmured.

„LOOK behind—once more,” the woman gasped, stooping a little from the saddle.

Even with that slight movement she swayed and almost fell. The man’s hand supported her—he only knew with what an effort.

„There is no one in sight,” he muttered, but he did not look. His heart was sick with the accumulated fear of these awful months.

They stumbled on again—a weary, heart-sickening procession. The woman’s eyes were half closed, her cheeks were as pale as death, her black hair was powdered with dust, her clothing soiled and worn. She rode a small Mexican pony, itself in the last stage of exhaustion. By her side, on foot, with his left hand locked in the reins, the man staggered along. In her face was the white numbness of despair, the despair which takes no count of living terrors. In his the shadow of an awful fear remained. His eyes were glazed and framed in deep black rims. His mouth was open like a dog’s, his knees trembled as he ran. Once the woman had turned her head, and seeing him had shivered. He reminded her of one of those prairie wolves, into whose carcass the bullet from the last cartridge in his revolver had found its way. If her lips could have borne the effort, she would have smiled at the idea that it was for love of such a man that she had thrown away her life. The terror of this unending chase had eaten the manhood out of him. He had no longer any hope, any courage. He followed only the blind impulse of the hunted animal—to flee. He wore shirt and trousers only, his socks had gone, his feet were bleeding through the gaps in his rent shoes. Yet he had held himself bravely enough once in the great world, before the cup of Iseult had touched his lips.

A speck in front—a sombre blur upon the landscape. He saw it and pointed. The effort of stretching out his hand overbalanced him. He fell in a heap upon the rough roadway, and for a moment lay still. Her pony also halted, trembling in every limb, his fore-legs planted outwards, his nose close to the ground.

She leaned down towards him.

„Gaston,” she cried feebly, „are you hurt?”

He rose to his feet, and as he did so she noticed that he kept his head studiously turned away from the direction whence they had come. He shook the dust from his rags of clothing, and he gathered the reins once more into his hands. Of his hurts, if he had received any, he took no more notice than a dumb animal.

„Come on,” he gasped. „There is wooded country ahead. We may find shelters Come!”

„Look behind,” she directed.

„No!” he answered, shivering.

„Look behind—I wish it,” she insisted. „It is better to know.”

Slowly he turned his head. There was little room for expression left in his face, but she saw the slow dilation of his eyes, the animal drop of his jaw. He stood as one turned to stone, gazing back along the way by which they had come. As the woman understood, she drew one long sigh and slipped from the saddle, mercifully unconscious. The man did not heed her. His eyes were still fixed upon that speck in the distance, a cloud of dust, a man on horseback. Curiously enough, his most poignant feeling was one of relief. It was the end at last then, the end of a chase surely more terrible than any since the days when sin itself was born.

She opened her eyes for a moment.

„It is he?” she questioned.

„It is he,” the man repeated, as one might tell the time to a stranger.

She pointed to the revolver in his belt, but he shook his head. She remembered that his cartridges were all gone.

„Kill me some other way,“ she pleaded.

„I could not,“ he answered. „I am not strong enough. I have no strength left. We have been very foolish, Christine. We should have waited in the city. There it would have been man to man at least. Now I am broken. I cannot strike a blow. I cannot even kill myself. I cannot kill you. I have no strength left. This flight by night and by day has robbed me of it. It was foolish!“

She turned her face to the ground with a little sob.

„I will hold my breath and die,“ she declared. „He shall not see me like this.“

The man stared at her dully. What did it matter, the rents in her garments, such trifles in the presence of death. He was a stupid fellow, and he had never gauged the measure of a woman's vanity.

The speck in the distance grew more distinct, the cloud of dust larger. Then there came to the man a last access of strength, a strength wholly artificial, begotten of the terror which lay like ice upon his heart. He plucked at the woman and half helped, half pushed her upon the waiting pony.

„He will catch us! He is here at last, Christine,“ he jabbered. „We must get to the wood. Perhaps we can hide, and strike him down when he is looking for us. I have a stone in my pocket I picked up. It is sharp—sharp as a knife! If I could get behind him—“

The woman shivered, but she suffered herself to be led. The pony staggered on as though every step might be its last. The man ran, breathing like a crazy machine, and with face almost black. And in their hearts they both knew that it was useless. Their pursuer was only cantering his horse, and he was gaining at every stride. Down the wind came the sound of his voice, the voice of the untired man who triumphs.

„Gently, my friends, gently! Do you not see that it is I, Mannister, who calls? Why do you hurry so?“

Over on his face went the hunted man, nerveless, and stricken with a new fear at the sound of that mocking voice. The pony stopped and swayed—collapsing rather than falling in the rough way. The woman lay there with her face to the earth and her arms stretched out. The man commenced to groan like a stricken animal, or else he too might have been taken for dead. So they lay when their pursuer, on a great bay mare as yet untired, rode up to them.

He sat on his horse looking from one to the other. He was a man of something apparently less than middle age, with smooth fair hair and face, which the hand of time seemed to have treated kindly. Only a sudden and very terrible light flashed in his eyes as he looked downward at the woman, a light which lingered, however, but for that single second, and passed away leaving his whole expression nonchalant, almost undisturbed.

„Upon my word,“ he observed, resting his left hand lightly upon his horse's flank, „I am distressed to have been the cause of so much suffering. You have been unreasonable, my dear Gaston, to force a lady into undertaking a journey such as this. A few words with you—that was all I asked. Surely it was not worth while to have given me all this trouble, and to have put yourselves to such inconvenience! My dear Christine, I must confess that the state of your wardrobe distresses me!“

Her shoulders shook, but she did not look up.

„And you too, my dear Gaston,” he continued, sitting still easily upon his horse and lighting a cigarette. „I must confess that it pains me to see you in such guise. We met last—I think that it was at the Cavalry Club, the day young Pennant tried to wear a roll collar with a dress coat. I remember your remarks upon the occasion, scathing but well deserved. You were always our recognized authority upon matters of the person. It grieves me to see you like this, Gaston. Is that indeed a shirt, the remnants of which you are still wearing! And, my dear fellow, pardon me, but your feet and hands—every finger-nail gone, I declare. I am ashamed to ask you, but upon my word—when did you take a bath last?”

The man called Gaston staggered to his feet. With the poor remnants of his strength, he threw himself against his persecutor, his nervous, bony fingers locked around the stone which was his only weapon. It was after all but a pitiful effort. The newcomer touched his horse with the spur, and his assailant rolled in the dust.

„Get up, my friend,” the former remarked pleasantly, looking downwards. „You and I must have our little conversation together, I suppose. Let us go as far as the wood there. We shall be better alone.”

Slowly and painfully the fallen man staggered to his feet. The newcomer withdrew one foot from its stirrup.

„Hold on to this,” he directed. „I will ride carefully.”

It was barely a hundred yards to the border of the wood, but more than once the man faltered and almost collapsed. When at last they reached their destination, the sudden change from the dazzling sunlight to the cool darkness of the thick trees was too much for him. He groped for a moment like a drunken man, then staggered forward and fell. Mannister stooped down and dragged him to his feet. For a moment he held him at arm's length, studying him with all the immeasurable contempt of the brave man for a proven coward. Then he placed him on a fallen log with his back to a tree trunk.

„Don't shake so, man,” he said, feeling in his pocket and producing a flask. „Drink some of this. It will give you the sort of courage you need.”

Gaston Sinclair grabbed at the flask, a sudden gleam of desire flashing in his glazed eyes. His nerveless fingers failed utterly to loosen the stopper. Mannister leaned over and took the flask from the hand which still clung almost passionately to it.

„You shall have your drink,” he said. „Don't be afraid. Here!”

A turn of his strong sinewy fingers, and the stopper was out. He poured some of the brandy into a silver cup and held it out to the other man.

„Drink,” he said. „Take it all! Don't be afraid. There is no poison there!”

The man drank and gasped and drank again. Mannister turned from him with the air of one who seeks to avoid an ugly sight. He looked through a gap in the trees out on to the plain, his eyes travelled backwards along that rough road to where the woman still lay. As he watched she moved her position, sitting up on the roadside, her head buried in her hands, her attitude, notwithstanding her soiled and dishevelled clothes, reminiscent of a former subtle and notable elegance. The man's face remained unchanged, but his fingers dug into the bark of the fallen tree on which they sat. This woman had been his wife. She had lain in

his arms, her lips against his, her passionate whispering like wonderful music in his ears. She had been his—she had loved him for it while at any rate—perhaps even now! And she had brought him into the shadow of the greatest tragedy which men and women have woven out of the loom of life. She had left him for this creature by his side; left him, and he had become that most pitiable object on the face of the earth—a forsaken husband. Yet he felt no anger for her—little even for the poor companion of her flight. Understanding had come to him during the long nights and weary days of his wonderful chase. Up and down the world, across continents and seas, through great cities and across the desert places he had followed them, his hand ever stretched out, until the fear which never left them had become a living thing, and their journeying a nerveless hysterical flight. He had left them no peace, no respite. When in some out of the way corner of the world they had fancied themselves secure for a time, a telegram had been handed to them—"I am coming"—and the chase began anew. And this was the end. They were broken—absolutely at his mercy—broken body and soul. He lit another cigarette, and turned away from the contemplation of that bent figure. Life, after all, was an unsatisfying thing.

He turned round suddenly. Sinclair had armed himself with a short stick, and his hand was lifted to strike. Mannister laughed as he struck down his arm.

„Don't be a fool," he said scornfully. „Can't you see that if I meant to kill you I could have twisted your neck at any moment? Sit down and listen to me.“

Sinclair gasped.

„Give me another drink," he begged. Mannister measured him out a small quantity.

„No more," he said firmly. „Sit down now. I want to talk to you.“

The man grovelled before him. His brain, giddy with the fumes of the spirit, held but one thought. He was to live! Mannister did not mean to kill him! It was unnatural—impossible!

„You are going to kill us, to kill us both!" he cried, in a frenzied whisper. „We heard of the oath you took. A year ago I could have met you like a man. Today we are broken, both of us. We have lived and slept with fear so long.“

„Your lives," Mannister answered calmly, „are not worth a stray pin to me. Live or die, I am indifferent. You will come to no harm from me. If I have desired vengeance," he added, with a faint smile, „don't you think that I have it? You are not the Gaston Sinclair that you were, my friend. The lady, your companion, too, has apparently suffered.“

Sinclair's body was shaken with groans.

„If only we could have stopped," he moaned. „Oh, it is terrible to be hunted! You begin to run—and you can't stop. You want to turn round and face the thing behind—and you can't. And your nerves snap one by one, and your courage dies; you forget that you are a human being. You rush blindly on, always terrified. Every time you look behind your heart sinks; in every crowd you search frantically for one face; every resting place you enter with a sob of fear. Locked doors are useless. There is a knock! You must open! A waiter perhaps, but the sweat is on your forehead, you are shaking like a leaf. The man thinks you are mad. Everywhere you are suspected—shunned. Every pair of eyes that meets yours

seems to carry behind them the knowledge that you are running away. Oh, Hell! It is Hell, Hell!"

"This," Mannister declared, with a pleasant smile, "is most interesting. You have had quite an experience, my dear Sinclair, and you speak of it most eloquently. Now you will kindly abandon this somewhat melodramatic attitude of yours, and—listen to me."

The last three words were spoken with a sudden tense note of command. Sinclair, whose head had sunk between his hands, looked slowly up.

"Well?" he said.

"When I first left England and followed you to Genoa," Mannister said, "my intentions were perfectly simple, and I may add absolutely primitive. I meant to kill you both on sight. I lost time just at first, and the chase became a long one. Lately I have had advises from England—and I begin to understand the game. It was a little more complex than I thought at first. It was a little more complex, I think, than you fully understood."

"I was a fool!" Sinclair groaned, "a hopeless, miserable fool!"

"You were the tool of clever men," Mannister continued. "So was I. It was part of a conspiracy. I can see that now. And while I have been away our friends over there have proceeded to strip me bare and divide the plunder. What was your share, my dear friend?"

"I cannot tell you anything about it," Sinclair groaned. "You know very well that I cannot. You know the penalty."

Mannister smiled.

"You will never," he remarked suavely, "be nearer death than you are just now."

There was silence for several moments between the two men. The little wood was singularly free from all animal noises, not even a breath of wind was stirring in the trees. Mannister spoke again.

"You will probably," he said, "never come back to England. In that case you are safe from our friends. You have at least a chance of escape. From me, unless you obey, you have none."

"I thought you said that you were not going to kill me," Sinclair declared sullenly.

"Under reasonable conditions, no!" Mannister said. "Such desire as I had for vengeance is—well, shall we say gratified. You will never be the man you were again, Sinclair."

"Curse you!" Sinclair answered bitterly.

"Curse those others—and your own vanity—not me," Mannister replied. "I wish you no further harm now than has already come to you. But the truth I mean to know, and as surely as you refuse to tell me, so surely do you die!"

There was a moment's silence. Sinclair was thinking of all the things from which he must cut himself off for ever, the clubs, the restaurants, the city haunts and friends—all these things must go. And yet it was something to live! Only an hour ago, life itself would have seemed a priceless and wonderful gift. It was no time to bargain.

"It was Colin Stevens who planned it," he said slowly. "There were seven of the others who were in it."

"The names of the other seven?" Mannister demanded.

„Colin Stevens was the leader,“ Sinclair repeated, unwillingly.

„The names of the other seven,“ Mannister said calmly, „or I shall wring your neck. It is not a pleasant death.“

„Phil Rundermere.“

„The blackguard! I saved him from ruin once!“ Mannister whispered softly. „Go on!“

„John Dykes.“

„Of course! Well?“

„Sophy de la Mere.“

„Ladies, too!“ Mannister murmured. „Well, she had no cause to love me. Go on.“

„Fred Hambledon.“

„Good! Who else?“

„Benjamin Traske.“

„Poor boy! He went where he was led, of course. That makes five.“

„Ernest Jacobs.“

„False little brute!“ Mannister murmured. „I judged he must have been in it. One more, Sinclair.“

„You know enough,“ Sinclair muttered. „Let the other one go. He was led into it, as I was. He never did you any real injury.“

„Perhaps not, Sinclair,“ Mannister answered smoothly, „but nevertheless a bargain is a bargain, if you please. I must know his name. Or shall I guess it? Dick Polsover, eh? Ah, I thought so! Your own particular friend, Sinclair. Well, it’s hard to have to give him away, isn’t it?“

„You know their names now,“ Sinclair said, with a sudden gleam of curiosity. „What are you going to do? You cannot go back to England! You would never face it!“

„I am not quite so sure about that, my over sanguine friend,“ Mannister answered. „If ever I do, you may go down on your knees and pray for those eight men—if you think it will do them any good. By-the-bye, you, I suppose, were the decoy to get me out of England. It was for that purpose that you made love to my wife. What did you get out of it?“

„Five thousand pounds!“ Sinclair answered. „I was to have had more, but it has never come.“

„A bad bargain,“ Mannister declared. „Why, you must have spent nearly that running away from me.“

„We have spent it all,“ Sinclair answered. „We have not enough to live on for a month.“

„I am afraid,“ Mannister declared, swinging his riding boot against the trunk of the tree, „that in making you a present of the gift of life, I am not doing you a very great service—you or the woman who is now dependent upon you. You will have to work, Sinclair, I am afraid. You never liked work, did you?“

„Haven’t you nearly finished with me?“ Sinclair answered. „I must look after—her. We need food.“

„You will find plenty in the wagon outside,“ Mannister answered. „The lady whom you tactfully allude to as *her*, is already being attended to. I have a fancy for travelling comfortably, and notwithstanding this attack upon my fortunes, I am not quite a pauper. Do you know, Sinclair, I fancy that our eight friends may have

been just a little disappointed. I never believed in keeping all my eggs in one basket. They looked upon me as a sort of Monte Cristo, but there were more treasure caves than one. Come, Sinclair, we will go. I have learned from you all that I required to know. Come to the edge of the wood. There is one thing more which I have to say to you. Come to the entrance of the wood there, and stand by my side.“

Sinclair staggered up, a weak, broken-spirited creature of a man; he was bent almost double, and he reached scarcely to the other's shoulder. Mannister showed no signs of fatigue. His white linen riding suit was unsoiled, his tie and collar immaculate. His hands, though brown, were unblistered, and his nails well cared for. He might very well have been riding through the hills on a Simla picnic. If he had suffered through that tireless chase, his hard bronzed face showed little signs of it. Compared with him, the creature by his side was negligible.

His left hand he laid upon Sinclair's drooping shoulder, with his right forefinger he pointed to where they had left the woman. A covered wagon was there now, and a fire smoking. The woman herself was just visible, reclining in a camp chair. Mannister's voice was slower and more deliberate.

„Sinclair,“ he said, „you see there your life. You have done me, as a man, the greatest injury which one man has learnt in nineteen hundred years to inflict upon another. In leaving you alive upon the earth, I make no pretence at forgiving you. To kick you into eternity would be, however, only the caprice of a child. The vengeance of God and man strikes deeper. The woman is yours by right of theft. I leave you together, and I leave you the care of her a charge upon your life. Only remember that my arm is long, and as you deal with her, so shall you be dealt with by me.“

„She loves me no more! She is weary already!“ the man muttered. „There is no path in life which we could tread together.“

„Too late,“ Mannister answered. „You must hew one axe in hand, even if it be through the wilderness. And for the rest, the love of a woman is to be won by the man on whom she leans. You must win hers, Sinclair. You played the lover well enough, no doubt, when you took her from my home. See that you play it again, and to good purpose.“

„I lied to her! I worked upon her jealousy!“ Sinclair muttered.

„My common sense has already assured me of that,“ Mannister answered, „else she would never have left me for you. Never mind. You must do your best. There is but one royal road through life for you—and along that road you must go hand in hand or alone to your grave. For the smaller matters, you will find that there is money enough in her name to keep you from starvation, and I shall require to hear of your marriage within two months. My divorce decree is before the courts.“

„She will not marry me,“ Sinclair said sullenly. „We do not speak. All day and night she weeps because of what she has done.“

„What you won once,“ Mannister said, „when surely everything was against you, you can win again now when she is alone in the world, and the poor remnants of her honour are in your keeping. At any rate you must try. Remember that it is for your life that you plead. Come.“

The two men approached the camp side by side, Mannister leading his horse by the bridle, tall, slim, debonair; Sinclair hobbling by his side, bent and broken, with



dulled eyes and wandering footsteps. The woman leaned forward to watch them coming. Her lips were parted, a tinge of colour had come back to her cheeks. Her beautiful eyes were fastened upon Mannister—it seemed as though she were fighting with all there was of life left in her, to draw from his stony face one single sign of recognition. He came and went amongst his servants, giving brief orders; once he almost brushed her skirts, and passed by with blank, unseeing eyes. She did not exist for him! He did not speak to her! He could ignore her so completely—he could act as though she were already dead! Faster and faster came her breath, and whiter grew her lips. She loved him! She had known it in the long nights, she had felt it like a mortal pain piercing her burden of intolerable shame. Now he was coming nearer—he had passed. He was upon his horse—how well he always looked upon horseback, and her fingers were gripping the shoulder of the poor creature whom she loathed.

„Remember,” he said, looking downwards with a flash from his steely blue eyes. „Remember, Sinclair!”

His horse plunged, and he was galloping away. She sprang to her feet—a cry of anguish broke at last from her dry lips.

„He is coming back!” she shrieked. „Tell me that he is coming back!”

„He is never coming back!” Sinclair said sullenly.

Illustration:

She sprang to her feet—a cry or anguish broke at last from her dry lips.

She looked at him for one moment, and her heart sickened with loathing. Away along the level road the figure of the retreating horseman grew smaller and smaller. She tottered, and fell forward upon her face. Sinclair sat still and understood why he was alive.

