

Pawned

Frank L. Packard

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(Continued from last week)

"Just strictly business then, of course?" Doctor Crang moved a step nearer to the girl. "In that case he must have pawned something, and Laverne sends nothing but high-priced articles to your father, who shall probably find quite a sum of money in Mr. Bruce's pockets. Eh—"

She bit her lips. She still did not quite understand—only that she bitterly regretted now, somehow, that she had removed the money from John Bruce's person; only that that drug-crazed brain of the man in front of her was digging, had dug, a trap into which she was falling. What answer was she to make? What was she to do?

With a sudden cry she shrank back—but too late to save herself. A face, now, hands that clamped like a steel vise, and that hurt, were upon her shoulder and throat.

"You lie!" Doctor Crang shouted hoarsely. "You've lied from the minute I came into this room. John Bruce—hell! I know now why you have ways refused to have anything to do with me. That's why!" He loosened one hand and pointed to the figure on the floor. "How long has this been going on? How long have you been meeting him? Tonight is nothing, you worked it all—drinking to take you for a little joy ride with your lover while father's away. Damned clever! You left him on that corner, and he's here wounded! How did he get wounded? You never saw him before! You never heard of him! You didn't know where you lived—He could only find the private entrance! Just knows enough about you to climb in through your back window like a skinned dog! But, of course, your story is true, because in your pockets will be the money you gave him for what he pawned. Shall we look and see how much it was?"

She tore herself free and caught at her throat, gasping for breath.

"You needn't look! I took it from him, and put it in the safe over there before you came—to keep it away from you."

Doctor Crang swept a hand across his eyes and through his hair with a savage, jerky movement, and then he laughed immoderately.

"What a little liar you are! Well, then—two can play at the same game. I lied to you about your lover there. I said there was nothing could save him. Yes, yes, Claire, my dear, I lied! He knelt suddenly, and suddenly intent and professional studied John Bruce's face, and felt again for the pulse beat at John Bruce's wrist. "Pretty near the limit," he stated coolly. "Internal bleeding." He threw back his shoulders in a strange, egotistical way. "Not many men could do anything; but I, Sydney Angus Crang, could! Ha, ha! In ten minutes he could be on the road to recovery—but ten minutes, otherwise, is exactly the length of time he has to live."

An instant Claire Veniza stared at him. Her mind reeled with chaos, with terror and dismay.

"Then do something!" she implored wildly. "If you can save him, do it! You must! You shall!"

"Why should I?" he demanded. His teeth were clamped hard together.

"Why should I save your lover? No—damn him!"

He drew away from him, and suddenly, on her knees, buried her face in his hands and burst into sobs.

"This—this is terrible—terrible!" she cried out. "Has that frightful stuff transformed you into an absolute fiend? Are you no longer even human?"

Flushed, a curious look of hunger in his eyes, he gazed at her.

"I'm devilishly human in some respects!" His voice rose, out of control. "I want you! I have wanted you from the day I saw you."

She shivered. Her hands felt suddenly icy as she pressed them against her face.

"Thank God, then," she breathed, "for this, at least—that you will never get me!"

"Won't I?" His voice rose higher, trembling with passion. "Won't I? By God, I will! The one thing in life I will have some way or another! You understand? I will! And do you think—"

He turned slowly and faced Doctor Crang.

"You do not know what you are doing," she formed the words with a great effort.

"Oh, yes, I do!" he answered with mocking deliberation. "I know that if I can get you one way I can get you another, and the way doesn't matter."

"God forgive you, then," she said in a dead voice, "for I never can or will let you have me."

"You'll marry me?" His face was flushed with passion.

She stared at a step.

"Yes," he said.

He reached out for her with savage eagerness.

"Claire!" he cried. "Claire!"

She pushed him back with both hands.

"Not yet!" she said, and tried to steady her voice. "There is another side to the bargain. The price is this man's life. If he lives I will marry you, and in that case, as you will know, I can say nothing of what I am not only free, but I will do my utmost to make you criminally responsible for his death."

"Ah!" Doctor Crang stared at her. His hand, still reaching out to touch her, trembled; his face was hectic; his eyes were alight again with feverish hunger—and then suddenly the man seemed transformed into another being. He was on his knees beside John Bruce, and had opened his handbag in an instant and in another moment was in his hands. The man of a moment before was gone; one Sydney Angus Crang, of many degrees, professional, deft, immersed in his work, had taken the other's place. "More water! An extra basin!" he ordered curtly.

Claire Veniza obeyed him in a mechanical way. Her brain was numbed, exhausted, possessed of a great weariness. She watched him for a little while. He flung another order at her.

"Make up that couch into a bed!" he directed. "He can't be moved even upstairs tonight."

Again she obeyed him; finally she helped him to lift John Bruce to the couch.

She sat down in a chair and waited. She did not know what for. Doctor Crang had drawn another chair to the couch and sat there watching his patient. John Bruce, as far as she could tell, showed no sign of life.

Then Doctor Crang's voice seemed to float out of nothingness:

"He will live, Claire, my dear! By God, I'd like to have done that piece of work in a clinic! Some of 'em would sit up! D'ye hear, Claire—he'll live!"

She was conscious that he was studying her; she did not look at him, nor did she answer.

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An eternity seemed to pass. She heard a motor stop outside in front of the house. That would be her father and Hawkins.

The front door opened and closed, footsteps entered the room—and suddenly seemed to quicken and hurry forward. She rose from her chair.

"What's this? What's the matter? What's happened?" a tall, white-haired man cried out.

It was Doctor Crang who answered.

"Oh—this, Mr. Veniza?" He waved his hand indifferently toward the couch. "Nothing of any importance."

He shrugged his shoulders in cool imperturbability, and smiled into the grave, serious face of Paul Veniza. "The really important thing is that Claire has promised to be my wife."

For an instant no one moved or spoke—only Doctor Crang still smiled. And then the silence was broken by a curious half laugh, half curse that was full of menace.

"You lie!" Hawkins, the round, red-faced chauffeur, had stepped from behind Paul Veniza, and now faced Doctor Crang. "You lie! You damned cock-eater! I'd kill you first!"

"Drunk again!" drawled Doctor Crang contemptuously. "And what have you to do with it?"

"Steady, Hawkins!" counselled old Paul Veniza quietly. He turned to Claire Veniza. "Claire, he asked, 'is she married?' and suddenly, blindly, started toward the door."

"It is true," she said.

"Claire!" Paul Veniza stepped after her. "Claire, you..."

"Not to-night, father," she said in a low voice. "Please let me go."

He stood aside, allowing her to pass his face grave and anxious—

and then he turned to Doctor Crang. "She is unfurlly very upset over what has happened here," said Doctor

(Continued next week.)