

The White Moll

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Night In The Underworld.....	3
Seven--Three--Nine	11
Alias Gypsy Nan.....	21
The Adventurer	30
A Second Visitor.....	36
The Rendezvous.....	44
Fellow Thieves.....	51
The Code Message.....	61
Room Number Eleven.....	70
On The Brink	76
Some Of The Lesser Breed.....	88
Crooks Vs. Crooks.....	97
The Door Across The Hall.....	107
The Lame Man.....	114
In The Council Chamber.....	120
The Secret Panel	128
The Silver Sphinx	137
The Old Shed	142
Dread Upon The Waters	153
A Lone Hand.....	162
The Reckoning	168

Night In The Underworld

It was like some shadowy pantomime: The dark mouth of an alleyway thrown into murky relief by the rays of a distant street lamp...the swift, forward leap of a skulking figure...a girl's form swaying and struggling in the man's embrace. Then, a pantomime no longer, there came a half threatening, half triumphant oath; and then the girl's voice, quiet, strangely contained, almost imperious:

"Now, give me back that purse, please. Instantly!" The man, already retreating into the alleyway, paused to fling back a jeering laugh.

"Say, youse've got yer nerve, ain't youse!"

The girl turned her head so that the rays of the street lamp, faint as they were, fell full upon her, disclosing a sweet, oval face, out of which the dark eyes gazed steadily at the man.

And suddenly the man leaned forward, staring for an instant, and then his hand went awkwardly to touch his cap.

"De White Moll!" he mumbled deferentially. He pulled the peak of his cap down over his eyes in a sort of shame-faced way, as though to avoid recognition, and, stepping nearer, returned the purse.

"Scuse me, miss," he said uneasily. "I didn't know it was youse - honest to Gawd, I didn't! 'Scuse me, miss. Good-night!"

For a moment the girl stood there motionless, looking down the alleyway after the retreating figure. From somewhere in the distance came the rumble of an elevated train. It drowned out the pound of the man's speeding footsteps; it died away itself - and now there was no other sound. A pucker, strangely wistful, curiously perturbed, came and furrowed her forehead into little wrinkles, and then she turned and walked slowly on along the deserted street.

The White Moll! She shook her head a little. The attack had not unnerved her. Why should it? It was simply that the man had not recognized her at first in the darkness. The White Moll here at night in one of the loneliest, as well as one of the most vicious and abandoned, quarters of New York, was as safe and inviolate as - as - She shook her head again. Her mind did not instantly suggest a comparison that seemed wholly adequate. The pucker deepened, but the sensitive, delicately chiseled lips parted now in a smile. Well, she was safer here than anywhere else in the world, that was all.

It was the first time that anything like this had happened, and, for the very reason that it was unprecedented, it seemed to stir her memory now, and awaken a dormant train of thought. The White Moll! She remembered the first time she had ever been called by that name. It took her back almost three years, and since that time, here in this sordid realm of

crime and misery, the name of Rhoda Gray, her own name, her actual identity, seemed to have become lost, obliterated in that of the White Moll. A "dip" had given it to her, and the underworld, quick and trenchant in its "monikers," had instantly ratified it. There was not a crook or denizen of crimeland, probably, who did not know the White Moll; there was, probably, not one to-day who knew, or cared, that she was Rhoda Gray!

She went on, traversing block after block, entering a less deserted, though no less unsavory, neighborhood. Here, a saloon flung a sudden glow of yellow light athwart the sidewalk as its swinging doors jerked apart; and a form lurched out into the night; there, from a dance-hall came the rattle of a tinny piano, the squeak of a raspy violin, a high-pitched, hectic burst of laughter; while, flanking the street on each side, like interjected inanimate blotches, rows of squalid tenements and cheap, tumble-down frame houses silhouetted themselves in broken, jagged points against the sky-line. And now and then a man spoke to her - his untrained fingers fumbling in clumsy homage at the brim of his hat.

How strange a thing memory was! How strange, too, the coincidences that sometimes roused it into activity! It was a man, a thief, just like the man to-night, who had first brought her here into this shadowland of crime. That was just before her father had died. Her father had been a mining engineer, and, though an American, had been for many years resident in South America as the representative of a large English concern. He had been in ill health for a year down there, when, acting on his physician's advice, he had come to New York for consultation, and she had accompanied him. They had taken a little flat, the engineer had placed himself in the hands of a famous specialist, and an operation had been decided upon. And then, a few days prior to the date set for the operation and before her father, who was still able to be about, had entered the hospital, the flat had been broken into during the early morning hours. The thief, obviously not counting on the engineer's wakefulness, had been caught red-handed. At first defiant, the man had finally broken down, and had told a miserable story. It was hackneyed possibly, the same story told by a thousand others as a last defense in the hope of inducing leniency through an appeal to pity, but somehow to her that night the story had rung true. Pete McGee, alias the Bussard, the man had said his name was. He couldn't get any work; there was the shadow of a long abode in Sing Sing that lay upon him as a curse - a job here to-day, his record discovered to-morrow, and the next day out on the street again. It was very old, very threadbare, that story; there were even the sick wife, the hungry, unclothed children; but to her it had rung true. Her father had not placed the slightest faith in it, and but for her intervention the Bussard would have been incontinently consigned to the mercies of the police.

Her face softened suddenly now as she walked along. She remembered well that scene, when, at the end, she had written down the address the man had given her.

"Father is going to let you go, McGee, because I ask him to," she had said. "And to-morrow morning I will go to this address, and if I find your story is true, as I believe it is, I will see what I can do for you."

"It's true, miss, so help me God!" the man had answered brokenly. "Youse come an' see. I'll be dere-an'-an'-God bless youse, miss!"

And so they had let the man go free, and her father, with a whimsical, tolerant smile, had shaken his head at her. "You'll never find that address, Rhoda-or our friend the Bussard, either!"

But she had found both the Bussard and the address, and destitution and a squalor unspeakable. Pathetic still, but the vernacular of the underworld where men called their women by no more gracious names than "molls" and "skirts" no longer strange to her ears, there came to her again now the Bussard's words in which he had paid her tribute on that morning long ago, and with which he had introduced her to a shrunken form that lay upon a dirty cot in the barefloored room:

"Meet de moll I was tellin' youse about, Mag. She's white - all de way up. She's white, Mag; she's a white moll - take it from me."

The White Moll!

The firm little chin came suddenly upward; but into the dark eyes unbidden came a sudden film and mist. Her father's health had been too far undermined, and he had been unable to withstand the shock of the operation, and he had died in the hospital. There weren't any relatives, except distant ones on her mother's side, somewhere out in California, whom she had never seen. She and her father had been all in all to each other, chums, pals, comrades, since her mother's death many years ago. She had gone everywhere with him save when the demands of her education had necessarily kept them apart; she had hunted with him in South America, ridden with him in sections where civilization was still in the making, shared the crude, rough life of mining camps with him - and it had seemed as though her life, too, had gone out with his.

She brushed her hand hastily across her eyes. There hadn't been any friends either, apart from a few of her father's casual business acquaintances; no one else - except the Bussard. It was very strange! Her reward for that one friendly act had come in a manner little expected, and it had come very quickly. She had sought and found a genuine relief from her own sorrow in doing what she could to alleviate the misery in that squalid, one-room home. And then the sphere of her activities had broadened, slowly at first, not through any preconceived intention on her part, but naturally, and as almost an inevitable corollary consequent upon her relations with the Bussard and his ill-fortuned family.

The Bussard's circle of intimates was amongst those who lay outside the law, those who gambled for their livelihood by staking their wits, to win against the toils of the police; and so, more and more, she had come into close and intimate contact with the criminal element of New York, until to-day, throughout its length and breadth, she was known, and, she had reason to believe, was loved and trusted by every crook in the underworld. It was a strange eulogy, self-pronounced! But it was none the less true. Then, she had been Rhoda Gray; now, even the Bussard, doubtless, had forgotten her name in the one with

which he himself, at that queer baptismal font of crimeland, had christened her - the White Moll. It even went further than that. It embraced what might be called the entourage of the underworld, the police and the social workers with whom she inevitably came in contact. These, too, had long known her as the White Moll, and had come, since she had volunteered no further information, tacitly to accept her as such, and nothing more.

Again she shook her head. It wasn't altogether a normal life. She was only a woman, with all the aspirations of a woman, with all the yearning of youth for its measure of gayety and pleasure. True, she had not made a recluse of herself outside her work; but, equally, on the other hand, she had not made any intimate friends in her own station in life. She had never purposed continuing indefinitely the work she was doing, nor did she now; but, little by little, it had forced its claims upon her until those claims were not easy to ignore. Even though the circumstances in which her father had left her were barely more than sufficient for a modest little flat uptown, there was still always a little surplus, and that surplus counted in certain quarters for very much indeed. But it wasn't only that. The small amount of money that she was able to spend in that way had little to do with it. The bonds which linked her to the sordid surroundings that she had come to know so well were stronger far than that. There wasn't any money involved in this visit, for instance, that she was going now to make to Gypsy Nan. Gypsy Nan was...

Rhoda Gray had halted before the doorway of a small, hovel-like, two-story building that was jammed in between two tenements, which, relatively, in their own class, were even more disreputable than was the little frame house itself. A secondhand-clothes store occupied a portion of the ground floor, and housed the proprietor and his family as well, permitting the rooms on the second floor to be "rented out"; the garret above was the abode of Gypsy Nan.

There was a separate entrance, apart from that into the secondhand-clothes store, and she pushed this door open and stepped forward into an absolutely black and musty-smelling hallway. By feeling with her hands along the wall she reached the stairs and began to make her way upward. She had found Gypsy Nan last night huddled in the lower doorway, and apparently in a condition that was very much the worse for wear. She had stopped and helped the woman upstairs to her garret, whereupon Gypsy Nan, in language far more fervent than elegant, had ordered her to begone, and had slammed the door in her face.

Rhoda Gray smiled a little wearily, as, on the second floor now, she groped her way to the rear, and began to mount a short, ladder-like flight of steps to the attic. Gypsy Nan's lack of cordiality did not absolve her, Rhoda Gray, from coming back to-night to see how the woman was - to crowd one more visit on her already over-expanded list. She had never had any personal knowledge of Gypsy Nan before, but, in a sense, the woman was no stranger to her. Gypsy Nan was a character known far and wide in the under-world as one possessing an insatiable and unquenchable thirst. As to who she was, or what she was, or where she got her money for the gin she bought, it was not in the ethics of the Bad Lands to inquire. She was just Gypsy Nan. So that she did not obtrude herself too

obviously upon their notice, the police suffered her; so that she gave the underworld no reason for complaint, the underworld accepted her at face value as one of its own!

There was no hallway here at the head of the ladder-like stairs, just a sort of narrow platform in front of the attic door. Rhoda Gray, groping out with her hands again, felt for the door, and knocked softly upon it. There was no answer. She knocked again. Still receiving no reply, she tried the door, found it unlocked, and, opening it, stood for an instant on the threshold. A lamp, almost empty, ill-trimmed and smoking badly, stood on a chair beside a cheap iron bed; it threw a dull, yellow glow about its immediate vicinity, and threw the remainder of the garret into deep, impenetrable shadows; but also it disclosed the motionless form of a woman on the bed.

Rhoda Gray's eyes darkened, as she closed the door behind her, and stepped quickly forward to the bedside. For a moment she stood looking down at the recumbent figure; at the matted tangle of gray-streaked brown hair that straggled across a pillow which was none too clean; at the heavy-lensed, old-fashioned, steel-bowed spectacles, awry now, that were still grotesquely perched on the woman's nose; at the sallow face, streaked with grime and dirt, as though it had not been washed for months; at a hand, as ill-cared for, which lay exposed on the torn blanket that did duty for a counterpane; at the dirty shawl that enveloped the woman's shoulders, and which was tightly fastened around Gypsy Nan's neck-and from the woman her eyes shifted to an empty bottle on the floor that protruded from under the bed.

"Nan!" she called sharply; and, stooping over, shook the woman's shoulder. "Nan!" she repeated. There was something about the woman's breathing that she did not like, something in the queer, pinched condition of the other's face that suddenly frightened her. "Nan!" she called again.

Gypsy Nan opened her eyes, stared for a moment dully, then, in a curiously quick, desperate way, jerked herself up on her elbow.

"Youse get t'hell outer here!" she croaked. "Get out!"

"I am going to," said Rhoda Gray evenly. "And I'm going at once." She turned abruptly and walked toward the door. "I'm going to get a doctor. You've gone too far this time, Nan, and -"

"No, youse don't!" Gypsy Nan's voice rose in a sudden scream. She sat bolt upright in bed, and pulled a revolver out from under the coverings. "Youse don't bring no doctor here! See! Youse put a finger on dat door, an' it won't be de door youse'll go out by!"

Rhoda Gray did not move.

"Nan, put that revolver down!" she ordered quietly. "You don't know what you are doing."

"Don't!?" leered Gypsy Nan. The revolver held, swaying a little unsteadily, on Rhoda Gray. There was silence for a moment; then Gypsy Nan spoke again, evidently through dry lips, for she wet them again and again with her tongue: "Say, youse are de White Moll, ain't youse?"

"Yes," said Rhoda Gray.

Gypsy Nan appeared to ponder this for an instant.

"Well den, come back here an' sit down on de foot of de bed," she commanded finally.

Rhoda Gray obeyed without hesitation. There was nothing to do but humor the woman in her present state, a state that seemed one bordering on delirium and complete collapse.

"Nan," she said, "you -"

"De White Moll!" mumbled Gypsy Nan. "I wonder if de dope dey hands out about youse is all on de level? My Gawd, I wonder if wot dey says is true?"

"What do they say?" asked Rhoda Gray gently.

Gypsy Nan lay back on her pillow as though her strength, over-taxed, had failed her; her hand, though it still clutched the revolver, seemed to have been dragged down by the weapon's weight, and now rested upon the blanket.

"Dey say," said Gypsy Nan slowly, "dat youse knows more on de inside here dan anybody else - t'ings youse got from de spacers' molls, an' from de dips demselves when youse was lendin' dem a hand; dey say dere ain't many youse couldn't send up de river just by liftin' yer finger, but dat youse're straight, an' dat youse've kept yer map closed, an' dat youse' re safe."

Rhoda Gray's dark eyes softened, as she leaned forward and laid a hand gently over the one of Gypsy Nan that held the revolver.

"It couldn't be any other way, could it, Nan?" she said simply.

"Wot yer after?" demanded Gypsy Nan, with sudden mockery. "De gun? Well, take it!" She let go her hold of the weapon. "But don't kid yerself dat youse're kiddin' me into givin' it to youse because youse have got a pretty smile an' a sweet voice! Savvy? I" - she choked suddenly, and caught at her throat - "I guess youse're de only chance I got-dat's all."

"That's better," said Rhoda Gray encouragingly. "And now you'll let me go and get a doctor, won't you, Nan?"

"Wait!" said Gypsy Nan hoarsely. "Youse're de only chance I got. Will youse swear youse won't t'row me down if I tells youse somet'ing? I ain't got no other way. Will youse swear youse'll see me through?"

"Of course, Nan," said Rhoda Gray soothingly. "Of course, I will, Nan. I promise.

Gypsy Nan came up on her elbow.

"Dat ain't good enough!" she cried out. "A promise ain't good enough! For Gawd's sake, come across all de way! Swear youse'll keep mum an' see me through!"

"Yes, Nan" - Rhoda Gray's eyes smiled reassurance - "I swear it. But you will be all right again in the morning."

"Will I? You think so, do you? Well, I can only say that I wish I did!"

Rhoda Gray leaned sharply forward, staring in amazement at the figure on the bed. The woman's voice was the same, it was still hoarse, still heavy, and the words came with painful effort; but the English was suddenly perfect now.

"Nan, what is it? I don't understand!" she said tensely. "What do you mean?"

"You think you know what's the matter with me." There was a curious mockery in the weak voice. "You think I've drunk myself into this state. You think I'm on the verge of the D.T.'s now. That empty bottle under the bed proves it, doesn't it? And anybody around here will tell you that Gypsy Nan has thrown enough empties out of the window there to stock a bottle factory for years, some of them on the flat roof just outside the window, some of them on the roof of the shed below, and some of them down into the yard, just depending on how drunk she was and how far she could throw. And that proves it, too, doesn't it? Well, maybe it does, that's what I did it for; but I never touched the stuff, not a drop of it, from the day I came here. I didn't dare touch it. I had to keep my wits. Last night you thought I was drunk when you found me in the doorway downstairs. I wasn't. I was too sick and weak to get up here. I almost told you then, only I was afraid, and - and I thought that perhaps I'd be all right to-day."

"Oh, I didn't know!" Rhoda Gray was on her knees beside the bed. There was no room to question the truth of the woman's words, it was in Gypsy Nan's eyes, in the struggling, labored voice.

"Yes." Gypsy Nan clutched at the shawl around her neck, and shivered. "I thought I might be all right to-day, and that I'd get better. But I didn't. And now I've got about a chance in a hundred. I know. It's my heart."

"You mean you've been alone here, sick, since last night?" There was anxiety, perplexity, in Rhoda Gray's face. "Why didn't you call some one? Why did you even hold me back a

few minutes ago, when you admit yourself that you need immediate medical assistance so badly?"

"Because," said Gypsy Nan, "if I've got a chance at all, I'd finish it for keeps if a doctor came here. I - I'd rather go out this way than in that horrible thing they call the 'chair.' Oh, my God, don't you understand that! I've seen pictures of it! It's a horrible thing - a horrible thing - horrible!"

"Nan" - Rhoda Gray steadied her voice - you re delirious. You do not know what you are saying. There isn't any horrible thing to frighten you. Now you just lie quietly here. I'll only be a few minutes, and -" She stopped abruptly as her wrists were suddenly imprisoned in a frantic grip.

"You swore it!" Gypsy Nan was whispering feverishly. "You swore it! They say the White Moll never snitched. That's the one chance I've got, and I'm going to take it. I'm not delirious - not yet. I wish to God it was nothing more than that! Look!"

With a low, startled cry, Rhoda Gray was on her feet. Gypsy Nan was gone. A sweep of the woman's hand, and the spectacles were off, the gray-streaked hair a tangled wig upon the pillow - and Rhoda Gray found herself staring in a numbed sort of way at a dark-haired woman who could not have been more than thirty, but whose face, with its streaks of grime and dirt, looked grotesquely and incongruously old.

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