

BLACK GOLD

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Black Gold by L. Elwyn Elliott

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L. ELWYN ELLIOTT

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BLACK GOLD

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TO VISIT
ALABAMA

BLACK GOLD

I

WHEN Margarita came out of the little railway station and turned to the left where a long ribbon of sandy road climbed the hill the light was already fading.

No passenger but herself had alighted from the London train: no other living things were in sight but Bob, the carrier from Sansoe, slowly gathering together the packages flung from the guards' van, and his old piebald horse, that imperturbable servant, very close kin to Bob himself. When she came back, if she came back, from this rather mad adventure to Brazil, she would find them here just the same, jogging along the moorland roads, she said to herself. The cart passed her at the bottom of the hill, but she smiled and shook her head when Bob offered her a lift; she wanted to think, to have a little time to get her story ready, to render her fantastic proposition clear-cut, before she launched it into the middle of her family. Casual as they were, you couldn't expect them to swallow the Amazon, as it were, without a gulp. The matter would need a trifle of tact.

Surmounting the rise with the easy swing of the country-bred, she kept her eyes upon the haunted wood just below the crest, not consciously seeing it, but soothed by its dark, withdrawn greenness. The sharp tang of October fought with the vanishing warmth of a brilliant day: the acid-

70
BLACK GOLD

sweet scent of heather and bracken hung in the air. When she reached the top of the hill, abreast of the wood's last trees, she checked her steps for a moment, looking down upon the little gorge below with its stream a rosy thread caught up into the sea, itself an opal mirror, and the pale road that left Sansoe below, and rose to twist away to Tregarwith.

Beyond the bridge over the little river, a few hundred yards after the road began to run upwards again sharply, a path diverged from it almost at right angles, skirting the rise and seeking the sea. Following this line, the girl's eyes encountered a big square house, its back to but-tressing granite, set in a nest of sheltered trees, but with a hardy face turned to wind and weather. As she looked, lights began to appear in the windows and streamed from the porch; the door was open for her.

She still stood without moving, looking at the house and valley and sea and moors, as if they suddenly presented themselves from some new viewpoint; the long lines of dipping heather-clad moorland were red-purple in the dying light, a haze already creeping up from the sea to their margins. The whole bold outline of the country was bared to the sky and the eternal winds, the granite frame only lightly covered with the close mantle of grass and heather, ling and gorse; woods there were, but these crouched in hollows in the mass of purple heights and shoulders, sheltering from salt air and beating storms. Last she looked at straggling Sansoe, a double line of sturdy stone cottages set along the banks of the river in their slip of a haven. But Margarita saw the village not as a haven but as a starting point for great adventures. In the deep and narrow inlet lay three

or four fishing boats, rocking gently, their slim masts high above the cottage roofs, frail impudent craft waiting their chance for sea harvests.

She walked on presently, but saw no road. Before her eyes was the dark, stuffily upholstered waiting room in the station in London, its coal fire blazing, a fat woman knitting silently in the corner, and Francina standing in front of the mirror, staring at her own pretty face, and talking about Brazil. Wherever there was an accessible looking-glass, Francina was always sure to be in front of it; Francina with her powder puff, her borrowed furs, the hole in her stocking, her gay laugh and lovely eyes, waving her little hands and insisting upon far lands and diamonds. Outside, the chilly mist of London, entering now and again when somebody opened the door, had seemed like a caustic intrusion upon Francina—that bewitching sister with such a reserve of rocky common sense behind all her carelessness and frivolities, and with such deep crevasses of irresponsibility scored in that same rock.

In what other way could you account for Francina's romantic error of marrying at eighteen, and marrying, of all people, Salvatore, with nothing in all the world but his handsome Italian face, his nearly first-class tenor voice, and his world-wide experience of second-rate, hand-to-mouth opera companies? It had been Francina's major departure from the serene bee line of personal advantage that she had followed since childhood; she had always been completely absorbed in her own personality, a vain little peacock accustomed to perennial spoiling, and accepting tributes to her fair, angelic beauty with unstirred calm.

Margarita, three years younger and of a much less sensational beauty, had never dreamed of