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The Green Seal

By CHARLES EDMONDS WALK

Author of "The Silver Blade," "The Paternoster Ruby," "The Time Lock," etc.

CHAPTER XV.—(Cont'd).

Struber looked at me. "What do you know about that! Beat me to it," was his comment. Then he asked Miss Fox: "How do you know they took it?"

"While you two were talking, before I came out on the porch, I paused long enough to look into the front room myself. Right away I missed the little box from the mantel, where it has always stood."

"Did you or your aunt keep anything in it?"

"Nothing of consequence: only a few choice Pescadero pebbles and agates—her precious stones, Aunt Lois jokingly called them. But you know what they are; ours were exceptionally pretty, but of no particular value."

We continued to discuss the episode at length, but with no very satisfactory results. The unavoidable theory that Mrs. Fox's assailants were Chinese explained nothing whatever. Anyway it was only an assumption that they were Chinese; the laundry wagon might have been a blind. Steve Willets was not a Chinaman, although masquerading as such at the time he met his death.

One factor, however, now seemed clear, namely: the object of the persistent, secret search, directed at first at the unknown Republic guest's room, next, at my person, and my own rooms and office, and then carried into Miss Fox's home, was closely identified with the carved ivory boxes; but as Struber observed, "There seemed to be no end of them."

My mind flew back suddenly to the early morning. For the first time I connected my two Chinese callers with the box missing from my desk drawer, a conclusion with which Struber promptly agreed.

"It's like this," he voiced an idea of his own: "in some way or other the Chinks 's mixed up in the whole business, but whether they're the main guys or just tools I don't know. But there's this about it—we don't know whether it's only the boxes they want, one particular box, or what they believe is inside some particular box."

"The diamond?" I suggested.

"Sure it might be the diamond," Struber admitted; "I've had that idee in my skull right along.

"But as I was going to say, if it was Mr. Ferris's two Chink callers that frisked his desk for his box — the one the diamond was in—they didn't have time to open it to see what was inside, or to look far enough to find the one with the ring. They didn't know what second the kid 'd be back.

"Same right here with your aunt, Miss Fox. Mrs. Fox surprised whoever it was trying to get her box. They must a-had it already when she came from the kitchen to the front door. If she hadn't a-done that they'd a-blew without botherin' her. She forced them to fix her so's they could make their get-away. They didn't stop to find out what was in the box."

"Do you suppose," I asked, "that the two Chinamen would have assaulted me this morning?"

"No, I don't. It's my guess that they came to find out what they could; they meant to question you. But the kid gave them an opportunity, and they weren't overlooking any safe bets."

Conjure our brains as we would, the whole thing remained inexplicable; so presently I asked Struber whether he had found the Republic Hotel's missing guest.

He scowled and shook his head.

"He just disappeared. There's nothing to go on but his description, and that's brought us nothing. We can only wait and see if anybody turns up dead. It isn't the same as if yuh was huntin' somebody that's well known; we haven't any idee who this guy is."

My glance met Miss Fox's. In hers I read understanding.

"Suppose I tell him," I proposed.

"If you think it best," she acquiesced.

Whereupon Struber listened with marked attention to a recital of Miss Fox's mysterious correspondent. He seemed to regard the circumstance as of vast importance, but one that for the time being merely added to his mystification—especially when he became convinced that neither the girl nor her aunt had the remotest idea who Strang could be.

"Trouble is," he laid his finger upon the crux of our difficulties, "we haven't anything to work on but loose ends; there ain't a blamed thing that can be made to serve as a connecting link. Suppose Strang and the guy at the Republic are the same. Suppose he sent you the diamond—why did he do it? Why did he write those letters to Miss Fox? What's she to him?"

"I know—beggin' your pardon, Miss—that you're Steve Willets's daughter. That don't help us any, either, except that Steve gets croaked by a Chink ring while cracking Mr. Ferris's safe where one of the boxes is. Right now everything's so dogboned tangled up that—unless—"

He trailed off into silence and sat revolving something in his mind. We waited for him to continue, but at length he shook his head once more and merely said:

"I was thinkin' o' Strang; somehow he sticks in my mind. I almost had an idee about him, but it ain't clear yet; I got to work it out a little further."

All at once he was struck with a thought. He turned to me abruptly.

"Seen anything more o' the gray auto?" he asked.

"It followed us here," I told him.

"Say!" he exclaimed, but relapsed into silence without saying it. In a moment he went on: "You just go on about your business without letting on you're wise to them trailing yuh. I'll get them ginks anyhow."

Before Struber and I returned to the city—Miss Fox was to remain at home—I obtained the desired interview with Mrs. Fox.

The result was the least expected of any I might have anticipated; that is to say, the older lady was chiefly filled with nameless fears and a dread of the mystery that seemed to hang over not her niece alone but also herself, and she really knew very little of the past that might be of use to us. She was a nervous, timid woman and no doubt of a disposition to magnify, in the light of later developments, the few facts in her possession, until she had come to be obsessed with a perpetual nightmare of terror.

These few facts, however, unsatisfying as they proved to be, were new even to Miss Fox and have a direct bearing upon subsequent developments.

CHAPTER XVI.

According to Mrs. Fox's account, her younger brother, Stephen, had always been wayward, and worry over his frequent escapades, more than one of which had amounted to serious breaches of the law, had hastened the death of his parents. Before arriving at maturity, he had been obliged to flee the country when suspicion pointed to him as the murderer of his older brother, Samuel.

Miss Fox whispered to me in an agitated way: "This is the first I knew that I ever had an Uncle Samuel."

The two brothers, it seemed, had been upon some expedition of their own—fishing, Steve accounted for it—off San Pedro, from which Steve had returned home. A Portuguese fisherman talked in the Wilmington barrooms of having seen two men fighting in a catboat after dark, and Steve's story was discredited. The body was never found, but Steve's flight was accepted as conclusive evidence of his guilt and the grand jury later returned an indictment against him. From the day of his disappearance nothing had been heard from him until nearly fourteen years later.

Meanwhile the Foxes had moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and had been in the latter city barely a fortnight when late one night Steve Willets appeared unannounced at their home—the same cottage where we were now gathered—bearing in his arms a girl infant three years old.

He displayed no trace of tenderness or affection for the child, which he declared to be his, and in answer to his sister's inquiries respecting the mark on the little one's breast, he denied that it was a birthmark.

"It's her brand," he had sardonically declared. "I put it there myself so I can tell her if I ever lose her. When a fellow's on the jump all the time, like I am, a kid's the easiest thing in the world to mislay. If she ever wants to know what it means," he had maliciously added, "just tell her it's the 'Kiss of the Silent Death.' It's her mascot."

"But," Mrs. Fox wistfully explained, "I couldn't ever tell her anything so awful, so I always said it was a birthmark. Steve was base enough to lie about it, and I thought if anybody would go to the trouble of tattooing a little baby they wouldn't waste time over a silly, meaningless mark like Lois's."

Struber's curiosity was getting the better of him, so I went over to where he was seated and told him about the tattoo-mark. He gave me a bewildered look, but made no comment.

The entire episode of Steve Willets's visit to his sister had been so cold-blooded, so brutal and unfeeling, that the woman had needed no urging to accept the little one as a charge. Her husband ordered the unnatural father from the house with a command never to show himself again under pain of being turned over to the police. Willets had laughed, apparently unimpressed either by the threat or the wholesome loathing with which these good people regarded him.

"I brought the kid here—and I risked my neck to do it, too—because I knew she would be well taken care of," he had said. Then followed a threat of his own: "See that you do it too, for if she dies hell will be a cool retreat for you compared with this happy home when I'm through with you. Some day I'm going to have use for the kid, and when I want her I'll want her in a hurry."

With no word respecting the baby's mother, nor his own hidden wanderings and flittings to evade the law, Willets faded away into the night as secretly as he had appeared to the surprised and dismayed Foxes.

They were not troubled by him again; at least he never directly bothered them; and it was not until he came to be connected with various crimes and outrages, after Lois had grown to maturity, that Mrs. Fox learned anything of her evil brother's subsequent career.

It was when his name began to adorn the newspapers that terror crept into her soul and took up a permanent abiding place there. Her husband was now dead; she had no protector; and she could not banish from her mind her brother's veiled promise to return some time and demand his daughter. Recollection of the man's vicious nature was stamped indelibly upon her memory, and she was in a constant state of gnawing anxiety over the girl.

"But now that he's dead," she pointed out pertinently enough, "who could have inspired to-day's dreadful attack on me? Why should anybody want the ivory box badly enough to do such a thing? Surely, it isn't worth much."

"Where did you get the box?" I asked her.

"I forgot to tell that part," the reply came slowly. "Her father left it the night he brought Lois to us. He had gone part way down the walk when he turned suddenly and came back into the lamplight—my husband was still standing in the open door. I crouched behind Jim, hugging little Lois so tightly she could hardly breathe, for I was terrified at the possibility of Steve changing his mind and taking her away again. I believe, though, he would have had to kill me before he could have done that.

"Anyway he stopped at the steps and pitched something at Jim's feet, something that clattered upon the floor. 'Here, take that,' he said. 'It held a fortune once upon a time; maybe it will bring the kid luck.'

"That's all. That is the sort of creature my only living brother was—his own brother's murderer. I was sick at heart for the poor thing who had been Lois's mother; I hoped that she might be dead.

"It was the ivory box that he threw at Jim. I kept it—I don't know why; perhaps because I thought it really might be worth something."

As Struber and I were preparing to leave, I detected an uneasy look in Lois Fox's eyes and fancied she was reluctant to see me go.

"Are you afraid to stay here?" I asked, lingering upon the porch.

"No, no. But I am troubled about that automobile following you. Please be careful."

My heart leaped at the thought that she should be concerned about me. I impulsively caught one of her hands in mine, and she made no move to withdraw it.

"I shall," I promised. "Since my own unpleasant experience I am not likely to walk into any more traps—not if I know it. But, my dear girl, you two women must not remain here alone, unprotected. I'll find out from Struber a reliable man and have him watch the house."

Although she protested that there was no need of my doing so, I was resolved that she was not going to be the next victim of the scoundrels who had enveloped us in their coil. And yet, when the snare was finally laid for us we both walked into it as blindly as moles!

Our taxi had proceeded perhaps two blocks on the return to town when Struber muttered:

"There she is all right, all right! They stay just far enough behind so's a fellow can't see their number."

I looked back and saw the gray automobile perhaps half a square in our rear, painstakingly accommodating their pace to ours, as a few experiments on our part—speeding up suddenly and abruptly slowing down again—demonstrated.

(To be continued.)

CANADA'S LIVE STOCK INDUSTRY.

In competing for the markets of the world there is no branch of industry that exceeds in importance that of live stock breeding and raising. Paraphrasing the old Jingo cry, we have the land, we have the will, and we have the climate. What is needed is the means, and ever more means, and simultaneously the ways of marketing. However divergent in views and theories people may be, it cannot be denied that they are all united in a common effort to improve both agricultural and industrial conditions. In helping the one the other is being aided. The interests are inextricably involved. If either is especially prosperous, both ultimately must be, although one may feel the benefits of extra demand and high prices before the other.

In the past few years especially, a deal of scientific effort has been devoted to the cultivation of the land and improvement of productions of the soil, and sight has not been lost of the needs and necessities of that other branch of inestimable worth—live stock, meaning thereby horses, cattle, sheep and swine. In the latter direction pure-bred animals have recently been placed in various districts where their services were previously difficult to obtain, the registration of pedigrees has been nationalized, systematized and subsidized, grants towards greatly liberalizing the premiums at exhibitions have been made, a special branch has been established in connection with the Experimental Farm system at Ottawa to investigate the cause of disease, to give counsel to breeders and to control outbreaks of infectious or contagious ailments, judges and lecturers have been appointed free of cost, cold storage facilities have been arranged and refrigerator cars equipped and paid for, grants have been made under the tremendously beneficial Agricultural Instruction Act, with its ten million dollar attachment, for the encouragement of veterinary education and research, and everything possible has been done for the development and increase of co-operation.

But one of the greatest lines of endeavor has yet to be mentioned, namely the improvement of marketing and transportation facilities. Without inquiry and investigation nothing can be methodically and satisfactorily accomplished. With this principle in view a marketing commission was appointed, the duties of which were to ascertain advantageous points of sale and to effect and bring about the most convenient and economical arrangements for disposal, shipment and carriage to destination.

Owing to high freight rates, disturbances in shipping and scarcity of boats, unwonted difficulties have recently been experienced in exportation and even in handling across the continent. It is towards remedying these and placing matters in a much better light and on a greatly improved footing that the commission has been created. In many ways there is evidence that this is being accomplished, although undoubtedly there are obstacles to overcome that will be continually cropping up. Nor is the appointment of the aforementioned marketing commission the only step that is being taken for the advancement of the live stock and agricultural interests, but a commission of influential, widely-known and experienced business men has been appointed to go into the whole subject and to report upon the most advisable measures to be taken for the advancement of farming, breeding and raising, shipping and selling and financing, and for the aggregate prosperity of the country.

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Hold on to the Good Breeders.

It is well known that the progeny from mature parents are superior to those descended from young progenitors not fully developed. Boars and sows, for breeding, should be kept in a good thrifty condition, but not fat, writes a well-known breeder of hogs.

The writer has always been troubled to keep his breeding sows from becoming too fat, and consequently, farrowing a small number of scrawny pigs.

I once took a large sow to fatten for one half the pork. I did not know she was with pig and fed her all the cornmeal and wheat middlings she would eat. Imagine my astonishment and vexation when she had three little dwarfed pigs—not only smaller than pigs usually are when first farrowed, but emaciated.

Sows for breeding should not be allowed to run with the fattening hogs fed on corn, but kept in a pasture by themselves and given a plentiful supply of slop, made of equal parts of wheat shorts, cornmeal and wheat bran.

Most young sows will breed when three months old, if allowed to run with a boar, but eight or twelve months is as young as it is judicious to breed them.

The pigs from large-bodied, old sows will be more in number, and frequently double the size of pigs from young sows when farrowed—and this with the same feed and care—and will frequently weigh 50 per cent. more at a year old. Not only this, but it stunts or dwarfs the growth of such young things permanently, and they never attain good size.

A neighbor of mine last year bought an old sow in the spring for $10. She had ten fine pigs in April, which were fattened and sold to a butcher in the fall of the same year, bringing him $115, and he still has the sow for a breeder.

Sows should be kept for a number of years until their places can be filled with younger ones which have proven to be good breeders.

Formerly, heavy pork from hogs, twelve to 24 months old (and the fatter the better) was demanded. Men who worked hard in the open air, said there was a wasting quality about pig-pork—that it shrunk in the pot "and did not stick to the ribs."

Fortunately, this call for heavy pork is decreasing. In the farmer's family, and with people generally employed in indoor occupations in the towns and cities, pork from younger hogs is preferred. This pork is not only the best, being the tenderest and sweetest, but it is the quickest produced, at a lower cost and at better profit to the producer.

Young animals grow faster and with less food than when they become older, and pork from a hog less than a year old does not cost so much to produce as the pork from old hogs.

To make the most money from hogs, none, except those kept for breeding purposes, should ever be wintered over.

A little alfalfa makes the corn stick to the pigs' ribs.

The well-fed litter of pigs must have an opportunity to exercise or else thumps are liable to claim the plumpest.

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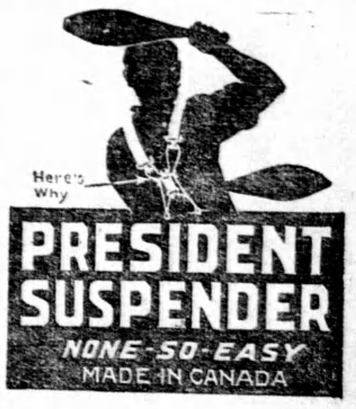

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