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Tangled Trails

—BY WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINÉ

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CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MASK OF THE RED BANDANNA.

It had come by special delivery, an ill-written little note scrawled on cheap ruled paper torn from a tablet.

If you want to know who killed Cunningham I can tell you. Meet me at the Denmark Building, room 419, at eleven to-night. Come alone. One who knows.

Kirby studied the invitation carefully. Was it genuine? Or was it a plant? He was no handwriting expert, but he had a feeling that it was a disguised script. There is an inimitable looseness of design in the chirography of an illiterate person. He did not find here the awkwardness of the inexpert; rather the elaborate imitation of an amateur ignoramus. Yet he was not sure. He could give no definite reason for this fancy.

And in the end he tossed it overboard. He would keep the appointment and see what came of it. Moreover, he would keep it alone—except for a friend handing under the left arm at his side. Kirby had brought no revolver with him to Denver. Occasionally he carried one on the range to frighten coyotes and to kill rattlers. But he knew where he could borrow one, and he proceeded to do so.

Not that there was any danger in meeting the unknown correspondent. Kirby did not admit that for a moment. There are people so constituted that they revel in the mysterious. They wrap their most common actions in hints of reserve and weighty silence. Perhaps this man was one of them. There was no danger whatever. Nobody had any reason to wish him serious ill. Yet Kirby took a .45 with him when he set out for the Denmark Building. He did it because that strange sixth sense of his had warned him to do so.

During the day he had examined the setting for the night's adventure. He had been to the Denmark Building and scanned it inside and out. He had gone up to the fourth floor and looked at the exterior of Room 419. The office door had printed on it this design:

THE GOLD HILL MILLING & MINING COMPANY

But when Kirby tried the door he found it locked.

The Denmark Building is a little out of the heart of the Denver business district. It was built far uptown at a time when real estate was booming. Adjoining it is the Rockford Building. The two dominate a neighborhood of squat two-story stores and rooming-houses. In dull seasons the offices in the two big landmarks are not always filled with tenants.

The elevators in the Denmark had ceased running hours since. Kirby took the narrow stairs which wound round the elevator shaft. He trod the iron treads very slowly, very softly. He had no wish to advertise his presence. If there was to be any explosive surprise, he did not want to be at the receiving end of it.

He reached the second storey, crossed the landing, and began the next flight. The place was dark as a midnight pit. At the third floor its darkness was relieved slightly by a ray of light from a transom far down the corridor.

Kirby waited to listen. He heard no faintest sound to break the stillness. Again his foot found the lowest tread and he crept upward. In the daytime he had laughed at the caution which had led him to borrow a weapon from an acquaintance at the stockyards. But now every sense shouted danger. He would not go back, but each forward step was taken with infinite care. And his care availed him nothing. A lifted foot struck an empty soap

box with a clatter to wake the seven sleepers. Instantly he knew it had been put there for him to stumble over. A strong searchlight flooded the stairs and focussed on him. He caught a momentary glimpse of a featureless face standing out above the light—a face that was nothing but a red bandanna handkerchief with slits in it for eyes—and a pair of feet below at the top of the stairway.

The searchlight winked out. There was a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder. A second time the pocket flash found Kirby. It found him crouched low and reaching for the .45 under his arm. The booming of the revolver above reverberated down the pit of the stairway.

Arrow-swift, with the lithe ease of a wild thing from the forest, Kirby ducked round the corner for safety. He did not wait there, but took the stairs down three at a stride. Not till he had reached the ground floor did he stop to listen for the pursuit. No sound of following footsteps came to him. By some miracle of good luck he had escaped the ambush. It was characteristic of him that he did not fly wildly into the night. His brain functioned normally, coolly. Whoever it was had led him into the trap had lost his chance. Kirby reasoned that the assassin's mind would be bent on making his own safe escape before the police arrived.

The cattleman waited, crouched behind an out-jutting pillar in the wall of the entrance. Every minute he expected to see a furtive figure sneak past him into the street. His hopes were disappointed. It was nearly midnight when two men, talking cheerfully of the last gusher in the Buckburnett field, emerged from the stairway and passed into the street. They were tenants who had stayed late to do some unfinished business.

There was a drug store in the building, cornering on two streets. Kirby stepped into it and asked a question of the clerk at the prescription desk.

"Is there more than one entrance to the Denmark Building?"

"No, sir." The clerk corrected himself. "Well, there's another way out. The Producers & Developers Shale and Oil Company have a suite of offices that run into the Rockford Building. They've built an alley to connect between the two buildings. It's on the fifth floor."

"Is it open? Could a man get out of the Denmark Building now by way of the Rockford entrance?"

"Easiest in the world. All he'd have to do would be to cross the alley bridge, go down the Rockford stairs, and walk into the street."

Kirby wasted no more time. He knew that the man who had tried to murder him had long since made good his getaway by means of the fifth-storey bridge between the buildings.

As he walked back to the hotel where he was stopping his eyes and ears were busy. He took no dark-alley chances, but headed for the bright lights of the main streets where he would be safe from any possibility of a second ambush.

His brain was as busy as his eyes. Who had planned this attempt on his life and so nearly carried it to success? Of one thing he was sure. The assassin who had flung the shots at him down the narrow stairway of the Denmark was the one who had murdered his uncle. The motive of the ambush was fear. Kirby was too hot on the trail that might send him to the gallows. The man had decided to play safe by following the old theory that dead men tell no tales.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JACK TAKES OFF HIS COAT.

Afterward, when Kirby Lane looked back upon the weeks spent in Denver trying to clear up the mysteries which surrounded the whole affair of his uncle's death, it seemed to him that he had been at times incredibly stupid. Nowhere did this accent itself so much as in that part of the tangle which related to Esther McLean.

From time to time Kirby saw Cole. He was in and out of town. Most of his time was spent running down faint trails which spun themselves out and became lost in the hills. The champion rough rider was indomitably resolute in his intention of finding her. There were times when Rose began to fear that her little sister was lost to her for always. But Sanborn never shared this feeling.

"You wait. I'll find her," he promised. "An' if I can lay my hands on the man that's done her a meanness, I'll certainly give them hospital sharks a job patchin' him up." His gentle eyes had frozen, and the cold, hard light in them was almost deadly.

Kirby could not get it out of his head that James was responsible for the disappearance of the girl. Yet he could not find a motive that would justify so much trouble on his cousin's part.

He was at a moving-picture house on Curtis Street with Rose when the explanation popped into his mind. They were watching an old-fashioned melodrama in which the villain's letter is laid at the door of the unfortunate hero.

Kirby leaned toward Rose in the darkness and whispered, "Let's go."

"Go where?" she wanted to know in surprise. They had seated themselves not five minutes before.

"I've got a hunch. Come."

She rose, and on the way to the aisle brushed past several irritated ladies. Not till they were standing on the sidewalk outside did he tell her what was on his mind.

"I want to see that note from my uncle you found in your sister's desk," he said.

She looked at him and laughed a little. "You certainly want what you want when you want it! Do your hunches often take you like that—right out of a perfectly good show you've paid your money to see?"

"We've made a mistake. It was seen' that fellow in the play that put me wise. Have you got the note with you?"

"No. It's at home. If you like we'll go and get it."

They walked up to the Pioneers' Monument and from there over to her boarding-place.

Kirby looked the little note over carefully. "What a chump I was not to look at this before," he said. "My uncle never wrote it."

"Never wrote it?"

"Not his writin' a-tail."

"Then whose is it?"

"I can make a darn good guess. Can't you?"

She looked at him, eyes dilated, on the verge of a discovery. "You mean—?"

"I mean that J. C. might stand for at least two other men we know."

"Your cousin James?"

"More likely Jack."

His mind beat back to fugitive memories of Jack's embarrassment when Esther's name had been mentioned in connection with his uncle. Swiftly his brain began to piece the bits of evidence he had not understood the meaning of before.

"Jack's the man. You may depend on it. My uncle hadn't anything to do with it. We jumped at that conclusion too quick," he went on.

"You think that she's... with him?"

"No. She's likely out in the country or in some small town. He's havin' her looked after. Probably an attack of conscience. Even if he's selfish as the devil, he isn't heartless."

(To be continued.)

The Spats Make a Showing.

Among the good-humored bits of memorabilia that Sir James Denham has put into his Memoirs of the Memorable is this little tale of the effect that white spats—when they were first introduced—had on the simple minds of those who were not prepared for them.

Going down to Buckinghamshire for a garden party in the middle of a London season, writes Sir James, we went down in London dress. I had white spats on. During the afternoon my host asked a number of us to come and see the young pheasants; he said he had a very good Irish gamekeeper. We had hardly appeared in the preserves when the keeper, much excited, came rushing up to me.

"Excuse me, sorr; come this way, come on, sorr, quickly this way. Get into the bushes where the ladies can't see yer!" He was dreadfully agitated and for fear he should have a fit I followed him into the laurels. Leaning toward me, he whispered:

"I would not for the life of me the ladies saw yer, for yer've got the laste taste of yer drawers showin' benathe yer trousers."

Minard's Liniment Heals Cuts.

Queer Belief.

Among the old German settlers in Pennsylvania it was a popular belief that a boy could be cured of homesickness by placing salt in the hems of his trousers and making him look up the chimney.

Waiters on skates bring tea to skaters at some of the Swiss hotels where the winter sports are in full swing.

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Nearly But Not Quite.

Dining out the other evening in the company of some two hundred musicians of all sorts and sizes, for lugubrious as musicians often look and are, they do occasionally relax, among the guests was Sir Frederick Bridge, the evergreen organist of Westminster Abbey. After dinner, on being asked to speak, he, of course, expressed surprise at being expected to do anything but enjoy the pleasures of the table, and went on to say, "I suppose I must follow the example of the man who owned to having made a fiddle out of his own head, and added he had enough wood left for two more." One of his stories told of some Americans being shown round the purlieus of the Abbey, and in Dean's Yard where Sir Frederick still lives, a member of the party observed a particularly lean cat, lazily enjoying the sunshine. On asking an elderly gentleman to whom the animal belonged, he was told it was Sir Frederick Bridge's. "Waal!" drawled the Yankee, "guess Sir Frederick ought to be prosecuted for cruelty to animals." Perhaps you are not aware, sir, that this cat is almost as old as Sir Frederick himself," was the reply, and it need hardly be added that it was the veteran musician who vouchsafed the information.



Played in Luck.

"So you were playing in luck last night, eh?"

"I'll say I was! That flaxy guy Jones borrowed my flask just about two minutes before the revenue agents raided the joint."

Minard's Liniment for Dandruff.



He—"You wouldn't marry a man for his money, would you?"

She—"Show me the man."

Of one thing I feel sure: that something outside of myself speaks to me, and holds me to duty; warns, reproves, and approves. It is good, for it requires me to be good; it is wise, for it knows the thoughts and intents of the heart. It is to me a revelation of God, and of His character and attributes; the one important fact, before which all others seem insignificant.—Whittier.

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