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Tangled Trails

—BY WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINB

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CHAPTER XXI.—(Cont'd.)

"We hadn't proved yet that Shibo was goin' it alone," Kirby went on, paying no attention to the interruption. "Some one might be usin' him as a tool. Horikawa's confession clears that up."

Kirby handed to the Chief of Police the sheets of paper found in the apartment where the valet was killed. Attached to these by a clip was the translation. The Chief read this last aloud.

Horikawa, according to the confession, had been in Cunningham's rooms sponging and pressing a suit of clothes when the promoter came home on the afternoon of the day of his death. Through a half-open door he had seen his master open his pocket-book and count a big roll of bills. The figures on the outside one showed that it was a treasury note for fifty dollars. The valet had told Shibo later and they had talked it over, but with no thought in Horikawa's mind of robbery.

He was helping Shibo fix a window screen at the end of the hall that evening when they saw the Hulls come out of Cunningham's apartment. Something furtive in their manner struck the valet's attention. It was in the line of his duties to drop in and ask whether the promoter's clothes needed any attention for the next day. He discovered after he was in the living room that Shibo was at his heels. They found Cunningham trussed up to a chair in the smaller room. He was unconscious, evidently from a blow in the head.

The first impulse of Horikawa had been to free him and carry him to the bedroom. But Shibo interfered. He pushed his hand into the pocket of the smoking-jacket and drew out a pocket-book. It bulged with bills. In two sentences Shibo sketched a plan of operations. They would steal the money and lay the blame for it on the Hulls. Cunningham's own testimony would convict the fat man and his wife. The evidence of the two Japanese would corroborate his.

Cunningham's eyelids flickered. There was a bottle of chloroform on the desk. The promoter had recently suffered pleurisy pains and had been advised by his doctor to hold a little of the drug against the place where they caught him most sharply. Shibo snatched up the bottle, drenched a handkerchief with some of its contents, and dropped the handkerchief over the wounded man's face.

A drawer was open within reach of Cunningham's hand. In it lay an automatic pistol.

The two men were about to hurry away. Shibo turned at the door. To his dismay he saw that the handker-

chief had slipped from Cunningham's face and the man was looking at him. He had recovered consciousness.

Cunningham's eyes condemned him to death. In their steely depths there was a gleam of triumph. He was about to call for help. Shibo knew what that meant. He and Horikawa were in a strange land. They would be sent to prison, an example made of them because they were foreigners. Automatically, without an instant of delay, he acted to protect himself.

Two strides took him back to Cunningham. He reached across his body for the automatic and sent a bullet into the brain of the man bound to the chair.

Horikawa, to judge by his confession, was thunderstruck. He was an amiable little fellow who never stepped outside the law. Now he was caught in the horrible meshes of a murder. He went to pieces and began to sob. Shibo stopped him sharply.

Then they heard someone coming. It was too late to get away by the door. They slipped through the window to the fire escape and from it to the window of the adjoining apartment. Horikawa, still sick with fear, stumbled against the rail as he clambered over it and cut his face badly.

Shibo volunteered to go downstairs and get him some sticking plaster. On the way down Shibo had met the younger James Cunningham as he came out of the elevator. Returning with first-aid supplies a few minutes later, he saw Jack and Phyllis.

It was easy to read between the lines that Shibo's will had dominated Horikawa. He had been afraid that his companion's wounded face would lead to his arrest. If so, he knew it would be followed by a confession. He forced Horikawa to hide in the vacant apartment till the wound should heal. Meanwhile he fed him and brought him newspapers.

There were battles of will between the two. Horikawa was terribly frightened when he read that his flight had brought suspicion on him. He wanted to give himself up at once to the police. They quarrelled. Shibo always gained the temporary advantage, but he saw that under a grilling third degree his countryman would break down. He killed Horikawa because he knew he could not trust him.

This last fact was not, of course, in Horikawa's confession. But the dread of it was there. The valet had come to fear Shibo. He was convinced in his shrinking heart that the man meant to get rid of him. It was under some impulse of self-protection that he had written the statement.

Shibo heard the confession read without the twitching of a facial muscle. He shrugged his shoulders, accepting the inevitable with the fatalism of his race.

"He weak. He no good. He got yellow streak. I bossum," was his comment.

"Did you kill him?" asked the Chief. "I killum both—Cumin'lam and Horikawa. You kill me now maybe yes."

Officers led him away. Phyllis Cunningham came up to Kirby and offered him her hand. "You're hard on James. I don't know why you're so hard. But you've cleared us all. I say thanks awfully for that. I've been horribly frightened. That's the truth. It seemed as though there wasn't any way out for us. Come and see us and let's all make up, Cousin Kirby."

Kirby did not say he would. But he gave her his strong grip and friendly smile. Just then his face did not look hard. He could not tell her why he had held his cousin on the grill so long, that it had been in punishment for what he had done to a defenceless friend of his in the name of love. What he did say suited her perhaps as well.

"I like you better right now than I ever did before, Cousin Phyllis. You're a good little sport an' you'll do to ride the river with."

Jack could not quite let matters stand as they did. He called on Kirby that evening at his hotel.

"It's about James I want to see you," he said, then stuck for lack of words with which to clothe his idea. He prodded at the rug with the point of his cane.

"Yes, about James," Kirby presently reminded him, smiling.

"He's not as bad as you think he is," Jack blurted out.

"He's as selfish as the devil, isn't he?"

"Well, he is, and he isn't. He's got a generous streak in him. You may not believe it, but he went on your bond because he liked you."

"Come, Jack, you're trying to seduce my judgment by the personal appeal," Kirby answered, laughing.

"I know I am. What I want to say is this. I believe he would have married Esther McLean if it hadn't been for one thing. He fell desperately in love with Phyllis afterward. The odd thing is that she loves him, too. They didn't dare to be aboveboard about it on account of Uncle James. They treated him shabbily, of course. I don't deny that."

"You can hardly deny that," Kirby agreed.

"But, damn it, one swallow doesn't make a summer. You've seen the worst side of him all the way through."

"I dare say I have." Kirby let his hand fall on the well-tailored shoulder of his cousin. "But I haven't seen the worst side of his brother Jack. He's a good scout. Come up to Wyoming this fall an' we'll go huntin' up in the Jackson Hole country. What say?"

"Nothing I'd like better," answered Jack promptly.

"We'll arrange a date later. Just now I've got to beat it. Goin' drivin' with a lady."

Jack scored for once. "She's a good scout, too."

"If she isn't, I'll say there never was one," his cousin assented.

(To be continued.)

A youngster in a primary school wrote the following about the pig: "The pig is very dirty and will eat anything but rhubarb. He has very little, if any, ambition for himself."

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"Aye," responded the judge dryly, "but you and I cannot yet be kindred, for the hog is not bacon until it be well hanged."



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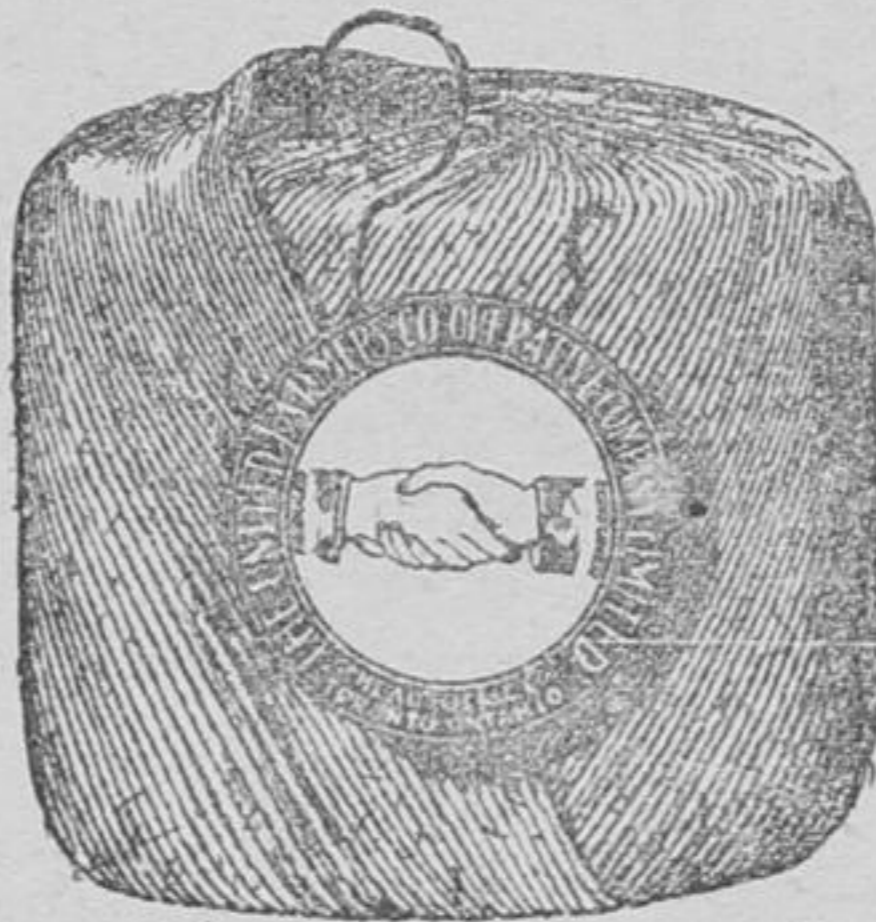
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