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CHAPTER XIII

Abduction

Very solemnly and placing each foot with a carefully calculated precision, the little doctor made his way from the ideal to the place where old man Hayes had been stored out of the way of the dogs.

The awful heat and closeness of the bar room which he had left, made the chill of the night air more noticeable. It struck him like a bar of cold iron across the forehead and made him catch his breath with a gasp. But his errand had no terror for him. He was one of those who, having learned a great deal about the mechanism of the human body, looked upon it as an indifferent piece of machinery capable of many improvements, and having about it nothing of the supernatural.

As a locomotive he considered it beneath contempt. Walking was at best but a succession of falls avoided. That had always been his opinion, but he had never known so much difficulty before in getting up that hind prop in time to save a collapse.

Before starting from the bar room door he had taken a line upon the house which he wished to reach, and he had contrived not to lose sight of his points, but it was difficult to keep them, moving as he felt compelled to do, as a knight moves at chess.

Earth seemed for once to have no solidity; the laws of gravity in his particular case seemed to have been suspended; his feet would not keep down and he suffered from an almost irresistible temptation to allow his legs to collapse altogether, a temptation which arose from a growing conviction that they really had nothing whatever to do with him, and that he could move perfectly well by the mere exertion of will power.

But he was not sufficiently drunk yet to yield to this temptation. He still had some control over his memory, and he remembered that he had tried that game before, and had been found in the street very cold indeed the next morning.

Dr. Protheroe had a considerable knowledge of the many infirmities of the flesh, but his knowledge of the different expressions of alcoholic dementia was comprehensive. He even diagnosed his own case accurately as he staggered along.

"Drunk," he said, severely; "very drunk. It's the cold air has done it. Always does it; but I'm not 'frail.' Who said Doctor Protheroe was frail?"

He stopped, swaying dangerously in the middle of the dark street to think out that problem, but even his mind could only move now as the knight moves. It would not go straight.

"Doctor Protheroe 'frail'?" he repeated this two or three times in a sort of singsong, and then, suddenly: "Dr. Protheroe," he said, "Doctor Protheroe, Thomash's—London—England. Not Ontario! None of your bloomin' Canadian 'bout me, Doctor Protheroe, Thomash's, London, England. Gentleman; professional man;" and then he burst into peal upon peal of derisive laughter, in the midst of which he fell flat upon his face in the mud.

After lying there for a few minutes chuckling still to himself, he rose upon his hands and knees, reached for his hat, put it rakishly upon the back of his head, and continued his journey upon all fours.

"Varicose veins," he muttered, as he went. "Shytatica, gout, notin' to do w' whiskey. All rot. Cause—absurd attempt violate law of nature. Mar dam fool; meant to walk on four legs, tries to walk on two. Posterior limbs over worked; painful shuffling follows. Of course." But in spite of the excellence of his reasoning he was obliged after a time to conform to custom, and finished his journey in a wild burst upon two legs, which landed him in a heap at the old man's door.

The violent exercise did something to counteract the effects of the chill air upon his heated brain, but not enough. He could remember that the door fastened with a latch; he could even repeat to himself the necessary instructions for lifting the latch; but for the life of him he could not find it.

Sitting upon the ground with his eyes carefully shut, and talking rapidly but incoherently, he explored the whole door from the mud to within six inches of the lock half a dozen times, and at last concluding that he must have reached the wrong side of the house, began to crawl round until utterly weary, he sank despairingly into a peculiarly cold puddle, from which lowly station he beat intermittently upon the solid pine logs of the wall imploring old man Hayes to "get up and let a fellow in." At last oblivion came to him, but not in the kindly fashion to which he had grown accustomed. There was a difficulty about his breathing which he did not remember to have noticed on previous occasions. It was quite natural that he should have turned over on his back, but his head was rolling about in an unusual way, and there seemed to be an obstruction in front of his mouth.

"Asphyxiation," he decided. "Unusual symptom, rather think unnatural. Not had enough whiskey for that," and then he went out into space where nothing mattered, and thought itself became a mere succession of vague and disconnected suggestions. One of these, the most persistent, was that he was flying. He remembered, as you do in dreams, that he had done this before. He had never been quite certain whether it was in dreams that he flew, or in waking life. The dream had always seemed

so real, but he knew that he was lying now. He felt himself going up and up, and it was only will which supplied the motive power. He knew that because he tried to flap his wings and could not. They were tied to his sides.

"Heave him up on to the pinto, Bill. He's dead to the world."

"You heave him up," insisted Combe from the other side of the stollen horse. "I'll fix that. He'll ride as well as the pinto's last passenger."

"The old man in there," replied Bill, looking over his shoulder nervously and speaking in a hushed voice.

"Yes. Can you steady him like that whilst I throw a hitch around him? Don't let him roll."

"I'll try, Jim; but his legs are like water. You can't hold them. They slip all ways to once."

"They 'won't do that long. Now! How's that?"

Combe had taken the tie rope from the pinto's saddle, and with it had lashed the doctor's feet together under the belly of his horse, after which he had passed the light of the rope round his victim's waist and secured him firmly by it to the horn of the saddle.

"I guess he'll ride like that for a bit," he said, looking critically at his work. "Seems pretty well packed, doesn't he?" and taking the doctor by the shoulder he swayed him tentatively in the saddle.

"Yes, he'll stay there till you untie him, but what are you going to tell the ferryman?"

"I know how I'm going to fix that, unless I gag him tight. I wish the doctor was not too drunk to sit on by himself."

"If he wasn't he wouldn't go."

"Yes, he would, with this," and the light flickered on a barrel hardly harder than the speaker's face.

Bill looked at Combe, doubtfully. He had known Jim many years, but had never seen the man he saw now. The sight staggered him and made him doubtful of the share he had taken in the proceedings.

"You don't mean no foul play by him, do you?"

"No, of course not. A dead ass ain't no good. Hand me his bridle," and Combe reached from the saddle for it. But Bill held on to it.

"See here, Jim, this is a mighty ugly business. It is for a woman?"

"For a woman, sure. Hand over, or they'll be after us."

Still the man doubted, and Combe saw a bar of light in the front of the ideal. Some one had opened the door to look out. The crowd was growing impatient for its drinks.

There was no time to be lost. It was crucial, but he had to do it.

"Bill," he hissed, "when she died, wouldn't you have done this or any other blanked thing to save her?"

"My God, yes," was the startled answer. Without further demur Bill handed over the bridle and Jim, turning the horses sharply down hill, disappeared into the night, whilst the wider slunk through the back premises into the ideal.

CHAPTER XIV

It seemed to the doctor that his pace was suddenly accelerated. In his dream flight he began to move with quite phenomenal rapidity. In all previous expeditions of the kind, the motion had been a steady sailing, so steady that if he had not seen the steeples and towers going by below him, he would have considered himself absolutely stationary in space.

But now he was going at a great speed, and jerkingly. Yes, certainly jerkingly, and the atmosphere was becoming distinctly colder. He had entered a stratum of cold air. Ah, yes, that must be it. He was getting higher; he was in fact rocketing. That was it, he reflected. You hit a bird in the head and it rockets. The whiskey has hit me in the head and it rockets. Certainly I am rocketing.

But as his thoughts grew less vague his body grew more and more cold. The spirit was dying out in his blood, and his tightly bound extremities were beginning to freeze.

But life Fraser, by which that silent figure led him, is not a river of this kind. Born of the snows in that barren land where earth's ribs show above the last of the black pines, the Fraser is bitter and savage from its birth. There are no lush grass lands for it to flow through, no miller's wheels for it to turn.

Its course is through sand and gravel; that it is gold gravel makes it more beautiful; past grey benches stained in leprous patches by vivid metallic colors. It has nothing to do with farming until, weary of life and retired from business, it reaches its muddy delta, where it farms because it is too feeble to do anything else.

Its life's work was mining. It is the great sluice box of northern British Columbia, the great water power which eats away the gold-bearing rocks, which builds the sand bars and beds them year by year with much gold, which tempts the strong-armed men with the possibility of quickly earned wealth, and having sucked their lives out of them, leaves them stranded in such back waters as Soda Creek.

The banks of it under which Jim Combe led the doctor's stumbling horse, were sheer cliffs of gravel, the raw edges of a great earth wound through which the river tore its course, and the brim of it was no place of primroses, but a fringe of great boulders, too heavy even for its strong waters to move, and here and there the bones of a stranded pine.

Far overhead, towering in the night mist, and behind them, up stream, the dull red light which marked the centre of such life as there was in Soda Creek.

When a cable crossed the river they paused, and Jim dismounting went down to the water's edge. The ferry was there, moored to the bank, the ice-cakes gathering round it as it lay, but there was no boatman by it, and the little shack in which he sheltered was empty. Jim got into the ferry and tried to move it, but the padlock. It was secured by a great padlock. It was not for the public's convenience and the ferryman's profit, and the ferryman had gone.

"Curse it. That's what I might have expected," Jim muttered, "but I didn't see him in the saloon when we left."

"For a time he wrestled with the lock and tried to break it with a boulder from the beach, but such attempts had been foreseen and the fastenings were too strong to yield to rude surgery.

"Doesn't matter much if they do come now," he said to himself, and began to haul on the off-chance that the ferryman might be within hearing. He even took out his revolver and fired a shot, but for awhile there was no response. The ferryman had concluded that his cowboy passenger of the morning was as other cowboys he had known, and would be as long over his half-hour's business as they had been, and, Caribou, being a free country, he had gone where he listed.

But the revolver shot had roused others, if it had not called the ferryman. The red glow in the centre of the town now redder now and larger. The door of the ideal was wide open, and there were voices on the night air, the voices of men which grew closer as he listened. Possibly Bill's suspicions had found voice at that moment, the revolver shot having confirmed them, and now the whole drunken gang was out looking for the doctor and his abductor. It did not matter much. He could easily escape such a posse as they were likely to form, but he turned towards his captive. It was no use keeping him any longer.

"Hulloa, you are awake, are you? Want them wraps off your mouth?" he asked, cynically. "They'll keep the cold off your chest," but he moved towards him and released the doctor from his gag.

"You might as well untie my hands whilst you are about it. They are nearly frozen already," said Protheroe in a matter-of-fact tone.

Jim looked at him in some surprise. The sobering effect of the ride had been even greater than he had anticipated.

"I guess you can sit on then by yourself," he remarked, unfastening the rope which bound his captive's legs, before freeing his hands.

"Steady! Don't fall off as you ride back, and don't try any monkey tricks with me. It ain't worth it," and then, reassured by the doctor's appearance, he let his hands go.

"Now you might as well ride back and finish the night with your pals. Sorry I troubled you."

But the doctor remained sitting where he was.

"You ain't afraid about finding your way, are you?" asked Combe. "They'll be here pretty soon now, if they don't fall in and get drowned. I'm not coming along. Soda Creek might not be healthy for me just now."

Still the doctor sat where he was, stretching his cramped legs, feeling the stiffened muscles of his arms, swaying a little in his saddle, and looking at Combe.

"You must have wanted me pretty badly," he said at length, and there was no trace of anger in his voice, no protest against his attempted abduction.

"Guess I did, or I shouldn't have took you."

"What is it? A woman? You aren't married?"

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