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The Lash of Circumstance

- BY -
Harry Irving Greene
 Author of "Yosonde of the Wilderness"

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CHAPTER X.

The expression on my companion's face remained unchanged as the sound of my cousin's footsteps was cut off by the bang of the closing door. The smile seemed to have grown into his features, so unaltered did it remain, and tiring of its monotony, I arose, and without apology, passed into the next apartment. Clere was sitting beside the bed of Uncle Abner, stroking his head with her hands as he rolled his eyes from side to side with weak whistling. Most of the lines which now furrowed his face were unfamiliar to me. Heretofore he had always appeared as a fairly well-preserved man of nearly forescore, but now his face was as wrinkled as one's palm. He shot a sidewise glance full of apprehension as I entered, but when he saw that I resumed his mutterings. Clere's face was tight fitting serious. Her lips were tight fitting and thinned by compression; the laugh had entirely deserted her eyes, and altogether she was the picture of one who suffers uncomplainingly. Of course it took no wizardry to guess the cause of her unhappiness. Bruce, to whom she was engaged, and to whom she therefore must be devoted, had broken his faith with her without explanation or apology; and if that had not been enough in itself, his appearance had been sufficient to shock any one who had pride in him. I knew Clere as I knew the alphabet. There never was a woman more generous, nor one who once having decided to give gave more freely. Therefore, I knew that having bestowed her heart upon Bruce she had done so without stint or reservation. Her nature lay close to the surface, and what might have been a superficial wound to another would hurt her to the core of her being. Sympathizing deeply with her, I approached her from behind and took her cheeks in my palms. "It is bound to come out all right, Clere," I half-whispered. She freed her face by a slight forward movement, and Uncle Abner, closing his eyes wearily, lay for the moment inert on the pillow. They seemed to be ignoring me in their silence, and unable to think of anything to do or say which might relieve the situation, I turned away and left them to themselves. LeDuc had gotten upon his feet in my absence, and hat in hand, appeared to be waiting for me to go with him. The whole atmosphere of the place was offensive to me, and as I led him down the stairs and out into the open I filled my lungs to the uttermost, as a convict might who breathes the pure air of freedom after long confinement in a fetid cell. It was quite a while before either of us saw fit to speak.

At the end of the block he threw his cigar into the street. "The police—you did not tell them about seeing your cousin have the key yesterday?" he said, half interrogatively, half assertively. I told him I had not. His next question was, "Why?"

"Because of several reasons. First of all, they did not ask me; second, because I have no idea that Bruce is guilty in this matter; and third, because I did not care, under the circumstances, to put his reputation in their hands. Also, I assumed that he would immediately acknowledge his possession of it and give an adequate explanation. You will readily understand that I did not want the newspapers to come out with a sensational story, and I, therefore, reserved that bit of information for my own investigation. You may be sure, however, that I had intended to mention it to him privately when we met again, and only volunteered the information to you because I knew you would work up to it eventually and corkscrew it out of me. Furthermore, I know I can rely upon you to suppress details, which although as yet unexplained, in all probability have no real bearing on the issues." His reply came without hesitation.

"Tom, you have known me for years and you know that even as a boy I always played fair. Now, I have no more use for a professional criminal than I have for a mad dog or a venomous serpent. They have shot me, stabbed me and laid in ambush to assassinate me, and when I think of them I am imbued with a great and righteous wrath. But when I come across a young fellow of good instincts who has fallen because of a reckless step, I would a whole lot rather give him a boost than a kick. I want you to get me right on that statement."

I signified my comprehension. As he himself said, LeDuc had always been a fairly even, generous, fighter, and his last assertion was wholly in accord with my understanding of the man. Glancing about to make sure that we were safely beyond earshot of any possible listener, I broached a matter about which I had been thinking for some little time.

"Billy, there is another thing which the police did not bring out and which I did not volunteer, but which you ought to know. My excuses for not having stated it before are practically the same as those I gave in Bruce's case, namely, because I do not believe it has anything to do with the crime and because I wish to shield a certain individual from annoyance and publicity. Under the same understanding that you are to consider it as a privileged communication, I will tell it to you. It is this: There is one more person, at least, who knows that Uncle Abner occasionally had considerable sums of money on hand, and to whom I imparted in a casual conversation the circumstance of this particular amount being in the house. I had a little visit with her yesterday on my way down town after

night know that they hold their own lives in the hollow of their hands and are prepared to meet resistance with bloodshed." I returned somewhat icily. But the coolness of my tones only made his wrath flame the hotter. "It don't make any difference. It was your business to be here when you knew there was so much money in the house instead of running away like a coward and leaving me to protect it all alone. And I suppose you expect you will inherit some of it after I am gone, but I'll show you," he yelled. The direct intimation that he would ignore me upon his death bed and that he considered my life of less consequence than a fraction of his wealth, turned me from him without a word.

I went to my own room, where I stood at the window looking upon the grounds below. Bruce and Clere were wandering aimlessly about, and even at that distance I could see the worry that lay upon her face. As for Bruce, he seemed to have recovered a good deal of his old-time assurance. But presently he turned away with a curt nod while she stood with a pathetic little clasping of her hands; then she turned and came hurriedly into the room. I intercepted her at the head of the stairs and signalled for her to come into my apartments. She did so, seating herself in a chair that I drew for her. "Well," I said inquiringly. She shook her head.

Sympathetically I continued: "It is really too bad and I don't understand it either. Nobody in the world has more confidence in Bruce's honesty than I have, and if he would only speak I would believe him against a host of circumstances. But there are certain things which he as a man could come forward and explain. He did not produce the key and denied ever having had it, while I know it was in his possession yesterday. The only thing we could get out of him was his permission for us to go to an uncomfortable place. Have you any idea of how he became possessed of the key to the house which I saw him have yesterday?"

"I have not—assuming that you are right. We have been talking that same matter over and he says he had no key in his side coat pocket and never carries one there. I know that I never gave him mine, and its disappearance at this time can be nothing more than a strange coincidence. He also denies that he ever at any time had possession of my key, and I am satisfied that if he had I should have missed it. I don't care a snap what anybody thinks or says; I know Bruce is as puzzled over your charge that he had it as you seem to be over his denial." Her mouth set defiantly and I knew she would defend him to the last ditch should I attack him, which, of course, I had not the remotest idea of doing. Instead, I became even more mollifying, hoping to reason him out of his stubbornness through argument advanced to her.

"I know that his denial proves nothing more than does the fact of his going broke on 'Change, or his making that silly remark that he was going to get \$10,000 some way. Neither would his refusal to tell us where he spent the night prejudice me, although it might seem somewhat singular, and under the circumstances be sufficient to arouse suspicion in those who do not know him. But the combination of all these things places him in a position before LeDuc which I regret to see him occupy. You and I have often discussed his outspokenness, and you have said that he did not know that there was a back door to anything. It is his present com-

Continued on page 7.

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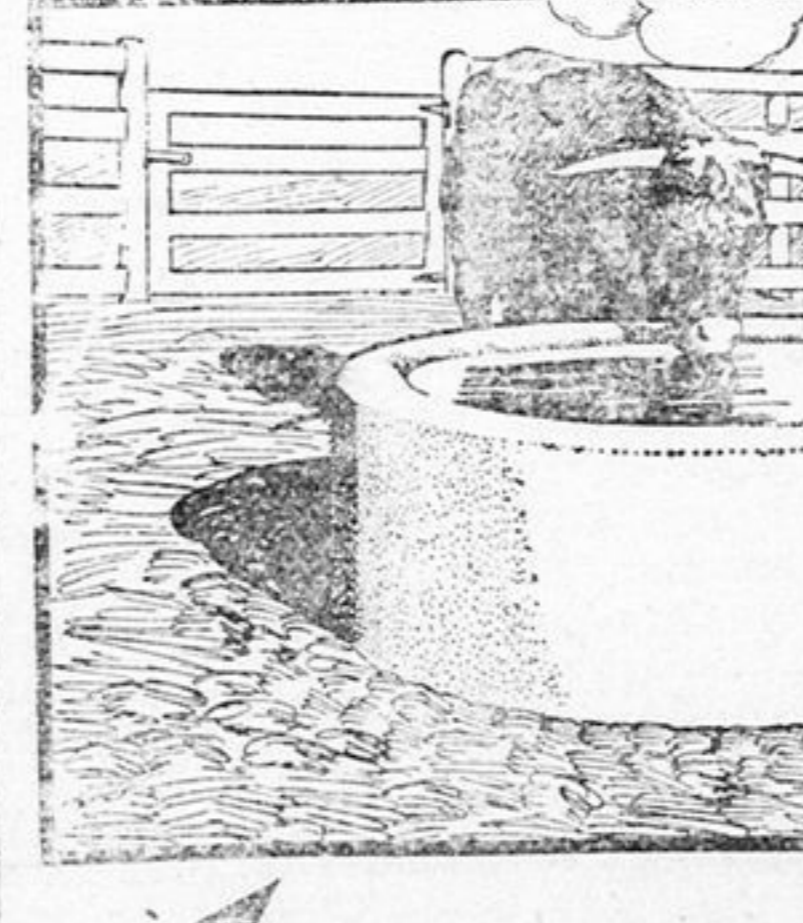
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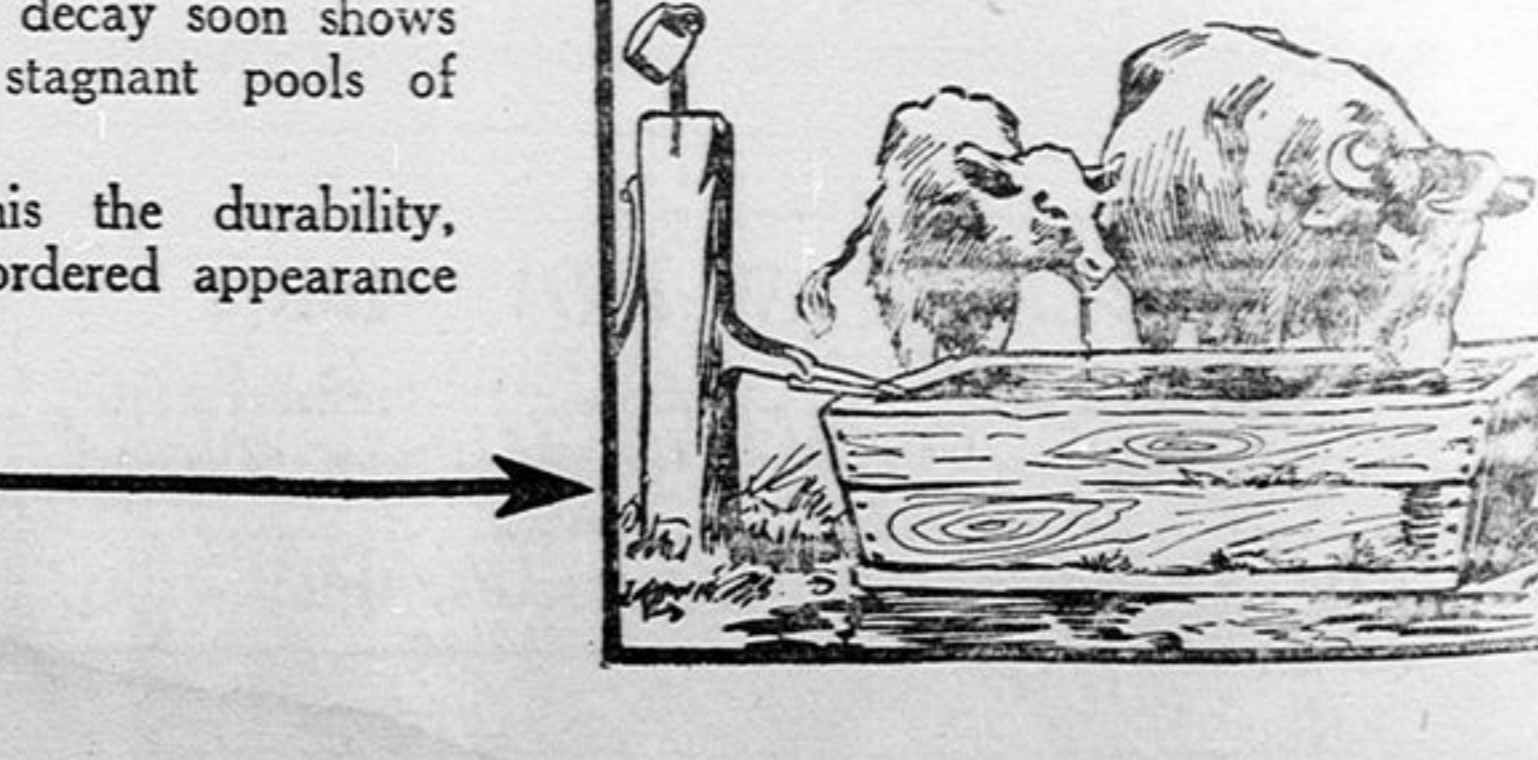
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