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The Lash of Circumstance

— BY —

Harry Irving Greene

Author of "Yosonde of the Wilderness"

Supplied Exclusively in Canada by The British & Colonial Press Service, Limited.

His doors were locked. Already a rabble stood before them vainly clamoring for admittance, and realizing the uselessness of remaining there I rushed down the steps and across the floor of the [illegible] shrieking uproar of the pit was unintelligible to me, but in the midst of it with his collar torn from his neck and his coat split down the back, was my agent, still dancing about insanely, with wild thrusts of his fingers into the air. The frenzy upon his face left me no vestige of hope, and I turned away with my brain spinning. Four steps further and I almost ran into the arms of Richard Mackay.

His teeth showed beneath his heavy moustaches; his eyes burned and his face was stamped with the vindictiveness that had brought this inferno about. He saw me at once and a brutal laugh of satisfaction burst from between the half-sealed lips which my fist had split. "I did it partly for your benefit, if that is any satisfaction to you. But I am not through with you even yet, puppy," he said in my ears, as he passed. Too broken of spirit to resent the insult other than by a look I passed him in silence.

How I got through that terrible afternoon I am still uncertain, except in a vague way. I dared not keep my luncheon engagement with Mrs. Dace and tell her all; but instead kept mumbling to myself that I would call her up that evening when I had a chance to think over what I should say.

There is always a chance, though it be only one in a million, that something will be saved out of a wreck; and come what might, matters could not possibly be more hopeless at nightfall than they were now. And perhaps by then I could think of something to retrieve myself temporarily; something which would eventually start me once more along the primrose way. Scarcely conscious of what I was doing I wandered to Bruce's office. He was not there, but his clerk told me that my cousin for some reason had closed out all his holdings the day before at a handsome profit and had announced himself as through with speculation. The bitterness of the contrast between him and myself brought the tears to my eyes. Should he carry out this resolve and stick to his commissions, as I had little doubt that he would under Clare's persuasions and the weight of his promise, has happiness was in his own keeping. He had undoubtedly again gained a modest competence, had a good business and the love of a sweetly beautiful and contented woman. Verily the richest gifts of the gods reposed in the hollow of his hand.

I went home and threw myself heavily upon the bed. At the summons to the evening meal I failed to respond; burying my face in the pillow instead, as for the hundredth time I rehearsed what I was to say to Mrs. Dace. I could only tell her that I had received a severe setback, but was planning a new campaign, and beg of her a few days' indulgence until I could go over matters. She had told me that she was to be at home that evening, and it had been understood between us that I was to be with her; therefore, at eight o'clock I arose and called for her number. The voice of Janet answered me, telling me that her mistress was not at home.

With an overwhelming presentiment of more misery to come, I vainly implored some information as to where she had gone and at what hour she was expected to return. The answer that I received was a click that told me of the hanging up of the earpiece and my future voicings brought only the ringing silence of an unanswering wire. I sank into my chair again.

In the midst of my stupor I heard the ringing of the door bell, and a moment later the sound of light footsteps ascending the stairs. There was a tap at my door, and at my listless response LeDuc quietly entered. I saw him run his eyes quickly over me as he tossed his hat upon the bed and drew a chair close beside mine. He said nothing, did not even smile, as was his habit, and in my misery I did not offer him any greeting. For perhaps a minute he sat without speaking, and then addressed me with unwonted gravity: "Tom, I have the proofs."

I started slightly and raised my eyes to his. I fancied they were full of regret, even sorrow, but his mouth was firmly set. My head was hot and my throat dry, and I cleared the latter before I spoke. Then I asked him hoarsely where they were.

He laid them on the table before me. They consisted of a silver cardcase, a bookmaker's ticket, a bit of steel, a soiled piece of paper, and a small lump of some grayish substance. Stupidly I stared at them.

CHAPTER XVI.

In the silence that followed the slow ticking of the tall clock sounded like the tolling of a bell. I shut my eyes. "Go on," I commanded, as he sat facing me with no signs of any inclination to proceed. "What does this junk signify to you?" He got up, and crossing the room, silently bolted the door that led to my uncle's apartments; then resumed his seat and addressed me in the low tones of one who adds caution to precaution.

"When I began this investigation, Tom, as I then told you I was about to do, I commenced to sift the chaff from the wheat in order to decrease the number of objects which I would in the last analysis be compelled to examine with great minuteness. My inquiries made upon the morning I first came, together with my inspection of the house upon that occasion, satisfied me of several things, among which were that Mrs. Tebbets had possessed no knowledge of the money being in the safe, and because of that and divers other reasons she should be eliminated; that your uncle had in no wise spread the information of his having the currency to anyone except yourself and Bruce, and therefore that he, as a distributor of the news to outside parties, was to be eliminated; that the house must have been entered by the front door, and therefore that the idea that all parties were telling me without reservation all they knew about the matter was to be eliminated; and last, that on account of the unusual drilling of the safe and the quantity and quality of the explosive used, that all thought of its being the work of a professional cracksman must be eliminated. You see that brought me down to a pretty narrow field." He ceased speaking, and with my eyes still closed and my head resting heavily against the back of the chair, I nodded slightly.

"I understand. Having eliminated the possibilities of its having been done by a professional, you have brought it down to Bruce, who possessed a key, or to Richard Mackay, or one of his friends, who might have obtained a duplicate from the key I left at Mrs. Dace's. However, go ahead."

"You seem to be following me to a certain extent. Having decided that it was the work of an amateur, I was obliged to start out with the thoughts in my mind as I attempted to still further construct the circle. Your key was in the possession of your uncle at the time of the crime, and I did not believe that you had ever had another. Mrs. Tebbets and your uncle had theirs; Miss Winton was missing, and you had assured me that Bruce had been in the possession of one which he failed to account for; that he had made rash statements about getting money; had become angry at your uncle; had been in a generally unnatural and desperate frame of mind the day before, and therefore I started in to investigate him. This seemed to me the most logical way of going at it, for looming as big as he did among the surroundings, I must either concentrate upon him as the probable thief, or greatly simplify matters by getting rid of him altogether. You had told me of his entering a cab the evening before the crime, and so I went to a friend of mine who is an official in the cab drivers' union. They are practically all union men in this city, and he sent out a circular to every member of his association calling upon the driver who had conveyed the person described to come forward and receive reward. Within two days I was talking to the man who had driven Bruce, and in that way found out where he spent the night. The cabman drove him to a resort ten miles from this place, and Bruce spent the night of the robbery there asleep." I opened my eyelids with an expression of surprise.

"I did not know that Bruce went to such places," I muttered. LeDuc went on.

"Nor does he voluntarily. He had been drugged. But I will come to that in a moment. Having secured this information, which of course eliminated him as the active burglar, I went to him and told him uphill and down that he was making a fool of himself. When he learned that I had uncovered his whereabouts on the night in question he made a clean breast of it. While he had been plunged in despair by the crash, yet he had taken by two drinks that day, one being a cocktail with you in a cafe. Soon after the last drink he had been stupefied, which fact he attributed to the reaction from his highly nervous state, but I came to a totally different conclusion, although I said nothing to him about it at the time. With your assistance he entered a cab, and remembered mumbling a direction to the driver to take him to his rooms; yet when he awoke in the morning he found himself at a place where he had no desire to be. Fear of Miss Winton's displeasure had made him resolve to remain silent rather than hurt her by the confession that he had got drunk, as he imagined he had, and gone to such a place. I could not understand why the cabman had taken it upon himself to convey him to this resort against Bruce's directions, so I came back at the driver hard. By the dint of more questions, aided by a few judicious threats, I drew out the information that the change in address had been given by a certain party whom the driver knew to be a friend of his passenger from the fact of having seen them together, and who had stopped him and given new instructions as to where to convey the sleeping one inside. That explained the driver's peculiar actions, and things were becoming decidedly interesting. Although practically satisfied now that Bruce had had nothing even indirectly to do with the matter, I nevertheless went a little further in my investigations. I was very much interested to find out where he had secured the money which had enabled him to resume his operations on 'Change. When I had convinced him that I would eep the information absolutely secret, he told me that it was furnished him by a woman client who did not care to have her name mentioned in connection with speculative matters. I traced the story to its foundation and learned that it was absolutely true. That left only one matter to be explained so far as Bruce was concerned."

"I suppose you mean his possession of the key and his denial that he had it, coupled with the possibility that some one else had somehow come into possession of it," I said, breaking the moment's lull. LeDuc nodded.

"Exactly. I was almost certain from the time that Miss Winton announced the loss of her ey that it had somehow got into the possession of her sweetheart; for its disappearance from her keeping convinced me that you had not been mistaken when you said Bruce had exhibited it or its duplicate. I had several talks with him and her on the subject, and they still insisted with a positiveness that I could not ignore that their original statements were absolutely correct; namely, she denied that she had ever loaned him the key, and he asserted that he had no knowledge of ever having it in his possession. I made them rehearse all their actions when together for some days previous to the robbery, and finally a thought came to her. She remembered that a short time previous, while she and Bruce had been strolling together, that she had slipped her pocketbook containing the key into his side coat pocket for a few moments while she was putting on her gloves. And that in turn suggested an idea to me. Had the pocketbook been partially unclasped, the key might easily enough have fallen from it into his pocket, and not having any occasion to use it for the next few days she naturally enough had not missed it. So we got the coat he had worn on that occasion and went through it. We found a small rip in the bottom of the outside pocket, and going further, discovered the key in the bottom lining. That solved the mystery. As for his having pounded on the table with it and afterwards denied it, that was easily accounted for by the fact that in his worriment he had unconsciously drawn it from his pocket and used it as you described and then replaced it mechanically without noticing what he had held or remembering the incident. I accepted this as the correct solution of the key incident, and then and there dismissed Bruce from all connection with the matter. For had he entered into collusion with anyone else and loaned him the key for the night, the other person most certainly would have been a professional who owned his own tools and knew how to use them, and that idea, as you know, I had already abandoned. Do you get me?"

"I think so. And having eliminated Bruce, whom I all along told you was innocent, you turned your attention to Richard Mackay as the next possibility." My companion smiled faintly, thrusting his hands into his pockets and leaning forward in his chair.

"Yes, for about ten minutes. At the end of that time I had reasoned him out of the case. The man who strangled your uncle was described by him as a large, strong man, who coughed peculiarly. That description fitted Mackay to a dot, and furthermore there was a possibility of his having been informed, through his more or less familiar connection with Mrs. Dace's establishment, of the money being in the safe at this particular time. Then, too, the incident of your having left your keys there for some days furnished a possible way by which he could have secured a duplicate through a conspiracy with one of the household. But that he did it personally was absurd. He is far and away above it. He is not a burglar; he is a boodler. He has a million dollars of his own, and would no more risk himself in an act like this than you would for a handful of silver. And having previously stricken out the professional cracksman because of the crudeness of the job, I was now compelled to eliminate Mackay and his friends because of the same reasoning that I had applied in Bruce's case. Had he turned the job over to some needy friend of his from the underworld, that person certainly would not have been a bungler. You see what that brought me to."

I arose in my chair with a mingled sensation of heat and cold climbing my spine and stiffening my hair. "Do you mean to say as the last remaining possibility you fastened your suspicions upon me?" I gasped. One of his hands fastened upon my wrist with tht snapping grip of a steel trap; his fingers biting like teeth into my flesh. As in our school days I felt the piano wire strength of his tendons and clinched my teeth between the fierceness of the clasp.

"Tom Halliday," he returned, sternly, "you stole your uncle's money." Glaring at him, quivering under an impulse to tear myself from him and strike him down, I first swelled my muscles for the effort, then letting them subside, sank back with an exclamation of supreme disgust.

"So that was your ultimate analysis!" I said, with bitterest scorn. "Of all the absurd, asinine idiots it was ever my misfortune to come in contact with, you are the most complete—you, an alleged detective. But you might as well finish your dream. I will compel myself to listen." I turned my head from him contemptuously; became aware that something cold and metallic was snapped around the wrist which he held, and leaped to my feet, only to find myself handcuffed to the arm of the heavy oaken chair. Frenzied with rage, I made an awkward dive behind my back with my left hand for my right-hand hip pocket as he locked his arms around me. With the quickness of thought he had twisted a revolver from my fingers, and springing back, laid it on the dresser beyond my reach, as shackled to the heavy piece of furniture, I could only stand quivering in helpless passion. Realizing my physical impotence, I sat down sullenly.

"So you feared I would murder you," I sneered. He negatived.

"No, I did not think you would do that. But I feared that you might murder yourself. Do you wish me to proceed quietly, or shall I summon your uncle to hear what I have to say?" For a moment I hesitated as I calmed myself by a mighty effort.

"There could be no good in getting him excited. If you have anything more to say to me you may continue or not, as you choose. I can scarcely help hearing you, but you will regret this outrage when I am set free." He did not seem to become either alarmed or angry at the threat; on the contrary his voice was even smoother than before as he resumed his seat.

"Tom," he continued, "I have always been your friend, and I wish to always remain so. When I have done telling you what I know about this crime we will talk about other matters, if you desire. But what I wish to tell you additionally is this: I had been compelled to eliminate everybody but you, and was therefore compelled most regretfully to start along your trail. As my first step I went to the hotel where you told me you staid on the night of the crime; looked at the register and ascertained the room that you had occupied. I engaged it, and went to it for the purpose of a thorough inspection. It was a back room overlooking an alley and the fire escape ran close by one of its windows. It at once occurred to me, therefore, that it would have been the simplest thing in the world for you, after having called up your uncle and after having left a request att he office for a morning summons in order to impress it upon the minds of others that you were in your room at midnight, and thus establish an alibi in case of suspicion, to have passed down the escape in the darkness, gone to any place you wished, and returned before daybreak. I therefore went down the ladder, as I assumed you had done, and at its bottom chanced upon what I consider to have been the only piece of pure good luck that came my way in the whole case. For, mind you, I insist that the rest of my discoveries were the result of experience in such matters, aided by close reasoning. Be that as it may, at the foot of the ladder I found your lost card case. I could only account for its presence there in one way; namely, that it had dropped from your pocket while you were either descending or ascending the ladder with your arms working above your head. That will perhaps remind you of the other night when you and I burglarized that office

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