THE IRON RIDER

A ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROMANCE OF A FIGHTING RAILROAD MAN

By FRANK L. PACKARD

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

There is bad blood between Larry Lannigan, the young assistant paymaster of the Rocky Mountain division of a Western railroad, and his superior, Mason. When sent to pay off a gang of troublesome Italians Larry finds that the payroll has been padded by the head of the gang, Maseno. Single handed, he defies them all and after desperate fighting rescues a boy, Tommaso, from their clutches. Later Larry, taunted by Mason for his "needless" fight, writes his resignation, and then proceeds to square accounts with Mason. He is determined to give the fellow a sound drubbing. He attacks the paymaster in his office at Angel. He knocks him down, and Mason's head strikes an iron safe. Larry cannot bring him back to consciousness, and he flees on the first freight train. At Beaver Dam Larry, who is wanted "dead or alive," is found hiding in one of the cars. Larry beats off the train crew, and, seizing the engine, passes through several stations. He afterward seeks refuge at a lonely station in the private car of Mr. Pelenoff, a visiting Russian railway official. He is concealed in a stateroom by the Russian's daughter Mera, who, believing his story that he has killed a man in self-defense, sits with her back to the door while her father and Supt. Felton converse about the crime. When she hears that not murder but assault and robbery is the charge she scornfully orders him to be gone. Larry later overpowers the telegraph operator at the station and uses the wire to gain information. He learns that Mason is not dead. As he is about to leap the next freight train he sees in one of the cars the face of Maseno, who is fleeing from arrest. Larry boards another car, where Maseno and his degenerate crew, seven in number, leap off to attack Pelenoff's private car. He follows. There is a conflict, the Italians are routed and Larry is wounded. Mera helps him escape on a hand-car, dresses his wound and takes a dangerous ride with him down the mountain. Larry's old friend, Ben Wilson, a rancher, comes along the road in a wagon, is hailed by Mera and drives off with the wounded man. Mera then stops a train carrying the Sheriff and his posse, and is taken back to her father's car. She defies the Sheriff, refusing to tell him anything about Larry. Wilson takes care of Larry for days, and finally brings him to his brother's house in Angel. Mera hears the Sheriff planning to seize Larry, and with Tommaso hastens at night to warn him. She gets Larry out of the house before the Sheriff reaches it, and with him races across the fields. It is her intention to hide Larry in her father's car, which is to leave Angel in the morning.

CHAPTER XXII.
The Way Out.

THE shouts from the house grew fainter. They crossed the road somewhere and plunged again into the open country. She paid no attention to direction now; she was glad to resign that into Larry's hands. So that they ran fast, as fast as they could—that was the one idea that possessed her. Several times he begged her to pause and rest, assuring her that there was no further danger, but she would not listen to him.

"If we get back before father, there will be no one in the car but Sam, for Johnson, the cook, was going out, I know—and I can send Sam on an errand of some sort while you get on board and hide there."

Larry stopped short in his walk.

"I—get on the car!" he ejaculated in bewildered amazement.

"Of course! But, come on—don't waste any time. It's bad enough just to walk"—she pulled him forward again. "What did you think we were going to the car for?"

"To see that you got back there safely—what else?"

"You must come with me; you've got to get away from Angel, it's your only chance!"

"Yes, perhaps—but not that way! You—you've done enough!" The words came from him in a low, passionate outburst, as though without volition, as though suddenly overwhelming his self-restraint. "Good God, I can't let you do any more! I won't let you take any more risk for me!"

She laughed a little—and, strangely enough, happily.

He helped her up the embankment. Some one was coming down the track toward them—running fast. And then a voice—Tommaso's—called out to them.

"You must keep away from the car," the boy called breathlessly.

"What is it? What is the matter, Tommaso?" It was Larry who spoke.

The boy was beside them now.

"It's the Sheriff!" he panted out wildly. "It's the Sheriff and Mr. Felton—they're coming to search the car!"

"He would not dare!" It was what she had said before—it was all she could say now.

"But he will! He will!" cried Tommaso excitedly. "I heard him say so, and—then I ran all the way."

Mera turned to Larry. "Don't you see! It's the best thing for us that he could do, to search it now—when you are not there! You must hide somewhere until it's over, and—yes—after that allow time for everybody on board to go to sleep. Come back at midnight—I'll have everything arranged—and I'll be waiting for you. Only, where will you hide in the mean time—back there by the butte?"

Larry shook his head.

"No," he said. "If Felton's the one who has been using the office over there, and he's coming down here with Laing now, I'll never get a better chance. I'll go there."

Mera hesitated a moment.

"There's the risk of getting in and out," she objected. "And the office will be locked."

"I've still got the key," he answered.

"Well, all right then," she agreed hurriedly.

CHAPTER XXIII.
The Tables Turned.

MERA'S caution as she climbed the car platform and noiselessly opened the door gave way to a sudden sense of security and relief. Sam, on duty, was snoring vociferously in the galley. It was obvious that her father had not yet returned.

She snapped back the catch of the spring lock again so that the door could not be opened from without, closed the door and gained her stateroom. She had left the light burning, and she stepped swiftly across to the little built-in mahogany wardrobe and took out a dressing gown. No one knew that she had been out of the car that evening.

A step sounded on the car platform and then the bell rang.

Her father knocked on the door.

"In bed, Mera?"

"Just going, dad," she answered. "I'm undressing."

"All right," he said. "I'll be in to say good night after you've got tucked away."

Perhaps ten minutes passed—and then, as she caught the sound of footsteps again on the car platform, she jumped up, ran across the stateroom and opened her door the fraction of an inch, placing her ear to the aperture. The outer door of the car was tried several times ineffectually, and then the bell was rung. Sam answered very promptly.

She heard Felton's voice.

"Is Mr. Pelenoff in the car, Sam?"

"Yes, suh! Yes, suh, Mistah Felton," Sam replied.

"We'd like to see him—Sheriff Laing here, and myself."

"Yes, suh. I'se confident he'll see yo', Mistah Felton. Dis way, gen'lemen!"

Mera closed the door. The footsteps of the three passed by. She opened her door once more, and then she heard Felton speaking again.

"I—I am afraid we are on rather an unpleasant errand, Mr. Pelenoff," he said hesitantly. "Sheriff Laing here feels that it is his duty to search this car. He has reason to believe that Lannigan is here."

Her father spoke sharply.

"You may go, Sam—no, wait! I shall want to question you. Well, sir"—he had evidently turned to the Sheriff—"I must say that this is at least a little surprising. You say you have a valid reason for believing that Lannigan is hidden in this car?"

"I wouldn't be here if I hadn't," the Sheriff returned bluntly.

The brusqueness of the reply had irritated Mr. Pelenoff, for Mera detected a softness now in her father's voice that was an ominous sign of storm to those who knew him.

"When do you believe Lannigan came here?"

"Some time this evening."

"Then it must have been after dinner," decided Mr. Pelenoff quietly, "for he certainly was not here when I left at 8 o'clock. Sam, has any one entered this car since I have been away?"

"No, suh."

"Were both doors locked?"

"Yes, suh."

"Perhaps you might care to question him, Sheriff," suggested Mr. Pelenoff coldly.

"I'm going to! I want to know where Miss Pelenoff has been all evening?"

"Miss Pelenuf, suh, has done been right heah"—Sam's tone of dignified rebuke brought a smile to Mera's face. "Miss Pelenuf, suh, done went to her stateroom right after dinnah, an' dat's where she am now."

"I can substantiate that," said her father. "My daughter is in her room retiring now. I spoke to her only a few moments ago. I should think this would be amply sufficient, Mr. Sheriff, to convince you that there is nobody here."

"Yes," Felton broke in pacifically. "I guess it must be a mistake, Laing, and——"

"I didn't expect Mr. Pelenoff to know there was anybody here," Sheriff Laing interrupted shortly, "and I didn't imagine that Lannigan would take the whole town into his confidence when he got aboard. What that porter of yours says is one thing—Lannigan being here is another. I came down here to search the car. I don't want any unpleasantness about this if it can be helped, but I'm going to make the search before I leave."

"I take it"—her father was speaking very slowly, with cool deliberation—"that on account of my daughter's previous refusal to answer your questions you mean to imply that Lannigan is here now with her connivance?"

"Well, if you want it without any frills on it—yes!" the Sheriff answered uncompromisingly. "That's exactly what I do mean. And I'll tell you right now, Mr. Pelenoff, that you"——

"It is unnecessary to tell me anything, Mr. Laing," her father interrupted frigidly. "Sam—bring the keys of every stateroom and cupboard in the car and give them to Sheriff Laing."

Mera closed her door again, snapped its catch—and stood waiting. Somebody ran to the door at her end of the car—Felton, probably, to stand on guard while the Sheriff worked through from the other end. Then doors began to open and shut; voices reached her in a muffled way, the words indistinguishable, while always she could hear the men moving about. After a long time, they passed by in the corridor outside her door, and she heard her father say:

"That is my daughter's stateroom."

Mera smiled patiently—she knew Sheriff Laing well enough to be quite confident that her opportunity was coming.

There was a sharp knock at her door.

"Mera, may I come in?" her father called.

She sat up on the bed, instantly busy with her hair, as her hands flew to the coiled masses upon her head.

"Yes, come!"

Her father stepped in.

"Why, dad!" she exclaimed. "You look upset! What is the matter? And who are all those people who have been running around the car?"

"Mera," he asked gravely, "has Lannigan been in this car since that night out there in the mountains?"

"No!" her hands dropped from her hair, which, incidentally, she had taken pains in no wise to disturb. "No—not to my knowledge? Why?"

"Sheriff Laing and Mr. Felton are here, and seem to have reason for thinking otherwise," said Mr. Pelenoff frowning. "They have looked through the car, and the Sheriff now insists on searching this room."

It was her turn now!

"Search my room—for Lannigan—at this hour of night!" she was on her feet. "He will do nothing of the sort! How dare he! How dare he!" She stamped her foot. "Where is this creature"—she ran to the door and out into the corridor—"I'll—oh!"

It was Sheriff Laing, leaning with folded arms against the side of the car, a few steps down the passageway.

He grinned at her maliciously.

"I am going into that room," he announced.

"You will not!" said Mr. Pelenoff sternly.

Savage laughter was in Mera's heart again. But she must not let the situation go too far—now.

"Father!" Mera caught his arm restrainingly. "Come away! Let him go in there if he wants to!"

"But, Mera!" Mr. Pelenoff having taken his stand unequivocally, had no intention of relinquishing it. "But, Mera, you"——

"Yes, let him go in!" she repeated coldly.

Over her shoulder she saw the Sheriff stride toward the stateroom door as she and her father emerged into the living room compartment, where Felton, who of necessity had overheard all that had been said and who was evidently very ill at ease now, greeted her awkwardly. She smiled icily in return.

She looked up. Sheriff Laing was back in the compartment. No one spoke. She was enjoying his discomfiture to the full.

Mr. Pelenoff broke the silence.

"Well, sir," he said harshly, addressing the sheriff, "are you fully satisfied now?"

"Oh, I guess he wasn't there," admitted the sheriff sullenly. "And I guess we'll be moving along. Come on, Felton!"

"Just a minute!" Mr. Pelenoff's fingers twirled with an ominous calm at his watch chain. "I have a word or two to say before"——

Felton interposed anxiously.

"Mr. Pelenoff," he said hurriedly, "I sincerely hope that you will overlook this—this unpleasantness. It's all"——

"Mr. Felton"—the big Russian cut the other off short—"not a little of what I had to say concerns you. You have, as it were, been a part of my family here; been received in all frankness and friendliness by both my daughter and myself. I had hardly expected that you would be a party, even passively, to what has just taken place. You will appreciate, of course, that when I resume my trip I shall be obliged to ask the railroad to delegate some other official to accompany me."

Felton flushed to the roots of his hair, hesitated, and then drew himself up a little stuffily.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Pelenoff," he said quietly, "very sorry indeed for this. But if you take that attitude there is of course nothing more to be said. I"—he bowed formally—"I have some work still to do at the office in connection with the payroll that must be attended to to-night, and so, if you will permit me, I will"——

Office! She stretched out a hand, grasping at the back of a chair for support. The office—they were going there—now! No, no, they must not go there—at least not yet. She must do something. But what? Felton was walking toward the door.

"No—wait!" She knew she was smiling, that her voice was softly modulated, that somehow, as though her prayer were answered, her emotions were masked. "Mr. Felton mustn't go like that, father. And neither must Sheriff Laing. It has all been a miserable mistake. We have all lost our tempers, and we are all at fault. But—but it mustn't go any further—must it?"

She paused and glanced brightly at the three in turn. Her father, quick to recover from his anger, was already beginning to smile in assent; Felton, frankly relieved, looked at her almost gratefully; only the sheriff, taken aback at her sudden change of front, stared dubiously.

She advanced promptly to Sheriff Laing, and held out her hand.

"I apologize for what I said a few moments ago," she said demurely. "I think we have misunderstood each other. I can understand that you had every reason to be suspicious of me because I wouldn't answer you that night, and I should have remembered that you had no choice but to perform what you felt, and what you were quite justified in feeling, was your duty. And you will try to understand me a little too—won't you? If you had been in my place that night and a man had just saved your life, I know you wouldn't have done anything or said anything afterwards to harm, now would you? You would rather have your tongue cut out—I'm sure you would! And to-night—well, of course, he couldn't have been there in my room—and that made me very angry. But I'm not angry any more, because I can see that, as far as a personal insult was concerned, it never entered your head. There"—she forced her hand into the sheriff's—"have I not made amends?"

Her father laughed outright now in genuine good humor.

"I don't see how you can resist that, sheriff."

"I ain't going to," said the sheriff, though a little ungraciously. "But I notice she didn't say anything about what did happen that night."

"Oh, that's taboo!" she exclaimed laughingly. "Now, sheriff, you're not going to spoil it all by bringing that up again!" She swept round to Felton, and in turn extended her hand to him. "We're good friends again, Mr. Felton, aren't we?"

"Why, yes, Miss Pelenoff," he answered with a smile, "of course we"——

"Of course, we are!" she caught up his words gaily. "And now, father, I think if we had the samovar, or perhaps the sheriff and Mr. Felton that"——

"No—really!" Felton demurred. "Please don't trouble, Miss Pelenoff. My excuse for going was really genuine, you know. I was on the way to the office when the sheriff met me, and I must get back there. It will be the wee small hours now before I get my work finished, as it is."

"Nonsense!" she responded lightly. "Father won't keep you long, and what are a few extra minutes! I shall think that our—shall I call it our reconciliation?—is only half-hearted if you refuse."

"But certainly, they will remain!" insisted her father, courtesy and geniality itself now. He waved the sheriff and Felton to chairs. "Mera, will you"——

But Mera was already enacting the role of hostess. Under her directions Sam began to set refreshments on the table.

"You have everything, father?" she asked hospitably.

"Everything, I'm sure, dear—thank you," he replied.

"Then, if Mr. Felton, and Sheriff Laing, and you, dad, will excuse me"—she swept a deprecating little glance over her state of dishabille—"I will retire."

CHAPTER XXIV.
Caught.

FROM the upper end of the yards the switching engine, struggling with a string of box cars, "making up" for the early freight next morning, coughed and wheezed asthmatically; and now and then, as she snapped her string away from her, flung the gleam of her headlight up and down the spurs. Over on the main line No. 43, the local passenger, west bound, was just pulling out again.

Larry, lying on the ground in the shadows of the roundhouse wall, shifted his position to a sitting posture for a better view of the station platform across the tracks. Tommaso he had sent away at once; and it must be fully half an hour now since he had left Mera Pelenoff at the car. No. 43 had been late.

The roar and rumble of the local on her way west again died away. Larry rose to his feet and began to cross the spur tracks warily.

Nearing the edge of the platform he dropped on his hands and knees, and lay quietly for a moment listening, straining his eyes to search out the shadows about the station. The way was clear. Satisfied, he rose again, jumped on to the platform and in a second had crossed it, reached the doorway that led to the divisional offices above, and was mounting the stairs.

Larry tiptoed swiftly and silently down the corridor, edging close to the wall, and with quick-flung glances over his shoulder against the possibility of either the despatcher or a call boy happening to look out of the despatcher's room, reached the door of his office, unlocked it with his own key, entered and locked the door behind him—and then stood silent and motionless, staring about him.

He picked up the flashlight to sweep its rays around him, and the next instant was on his feet, the flashlight out, and his automatic, whipped from his pocket, in his hand. Some one was trying the door—more insistently now, as though with a frenzied desperation from failure to open it.

"Unlock the door! Unlock the door! Oh, don't you hear me?"—he caught the muffled voice, her voice, wild with fear.

Startled, amazed, his brain awhirl, he sprang across the room and opened the door.

She reeled in, almost into his arms.

"Sheriff Laing is here!" she panted. "You haven't a moment!"

He made to lead her out through the door.

"Then, run"——

"No; not that way!"—she pushed him back into the room and closed the door. "Lock it!"—she was gasping out her words. "You can't go that way! They would see you! They are on the stairs now! Oh, you were so long in opening the door! And downstairs there was a call boy smoking a cigarette in the doorway, and—and I couldn't get in!" She was pushing him again, frantically now, toward the window. "After they searched the car, Mr. Felton said he was coming here to do some work. I was terrified. I—I made them wait for some refreshments—to give me a little time—and I went to my stateroom—and dressed—and got out without them knowing it. If it hadn't been for that boy I would have had lots of time—and now—and now—listen—hear them! They're coming along the corridor. The window! that's the only chance."

"It's too far from the ground for you to make it," Larry said hoarsely.

"It doesn't matter about me," she answered feverishly. "Go yourself! You must take the chance—it's the only one."

"It matters a great deal"—he steadied his voice, speaking almost calmly. "If they find you here they'll know you fooled them in the car, and nothing would save you then. Laing would go the limit, and"——

"It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter! Oh, go—go!" she pleaded.

"No!" he said. "There is another way." He reached up and pulled down the window shade. Dark before, the room was now in utter blackness. "They must not know that you have been here. We can take them by surprise in the dark after they come in. They don't expect to find me here. You must slip out in the confusion and run straight back to the car. You need not worry about me—I'll manage to get away."

"You can't—you know you can't!"—her voice caught in a half sob. "You are only trying to make me believe it to save me! I know what you will do, and—oh, they'll be here in another second! Listen! Listen! They're just outside now! Oh, go—please go—the window!"

"No—this way!" Larry dropped both flashlight and revolver into his pocket, and drew her back to the corridor wall close beside the door, but where the door in opening would hide her. "Go when I get them across the room together, but don't open the door wide to do it, or they may see you in the light from the corridor—just enough to slip through—and you must move like lightning when you start. And don't wait when you see your chance, for I shall not try to go until I know that you are"——He cut his words off short. The footsteps without had halted before the door. A key grated in the lock. "Keep still! Don't make a sound!" he whispered—and in a flash he was away from her and across to the far end of the room near the desks.

The door opened—a thin, wavering shaft of light streaked across the lower end of the room in the direction of the window. Laing and Felton stepped in. Like an animal at bay, set for its spring, Larry crouched in front of the desks.

The streak of light narrowed—vanished. The door closed. It was pitch black again. The footsteps of the two men approached him, crossing the room.

Then Felton spoke:

"Got a match, Laing?"

There was an instant's pause—then the crackle of a match.

Larry waited.

The flame sputtered up, held but the barest fraction of a second—a fraction of a second that outlined plainly enough Larry's face, as he meant it should do—and then he sprang full at the other, dashing the match to the floor.

A hoarse growl of rage, of triumph, of savage elation met his rush.

"By God! Lannigan! So I've got you at last, have I, my bucko!"

They were swaying together, locked in each other's arms.

"Not yet!" gritted Larry. "And you'll need all the help Felton there can give you!"

"Will I? Not by a damned sight!" The Sheriff had suddenly secured an under hold. "Felton—quick! The door! Call whoever's around! I'll take care of him until then."

The door! Felton at the door! Larry's jaws clamped. He had not thought it would be like that. He had had no other thought but the natural one that both would leap upon him. He struggled like a madman. Felton's steps were running toward the door. But Felton must not reach it—must not give the alarm. There would be no chance for her then. He tore and fought and wrenched to shake himself loose—and then both, gripped together, crashed down upon the floor. But he was uppermost. He snatched one arm free—the doorknob turned—and then there was the quick rustle of a dress, and Mera's voice rang out clear and cold.

"No, you don't, Mr. Felton! I've got a revolver here, and I can see you plainly enough. If you touch that door, if you move a single step from where you are, or make a sound—I'll fire!"

It seemed to paralyze Sheriff Laing with amazement, to rob him for an instant of all power of movement; it seemed to stun even Larry himself, though, automatically taking advantage of the second that the man beneath him was off his guard, his hands flew to a throat hold on the sheriff. The only sound was a half choked, startled gasp from Felton.

With the wonder of her upon him, a strange smile came to Larry's lips. She had no revolver, no weapon of any sort—save only her own cool, daring resourcefulness. And she had used that—and sacrificed herself!

A strangled, gurgling sound came from the form beneath him. It brought him with a shock to his senses. What was he doing? He did not mean to kill the man. He withdrew one hand, pulled his automatic from his pocket and pressed it against the sheriff's head.

"What she said to Felton goes with you—understand?"—— He was feeling swiftly through the other's pockets. "Now, get up!" he commanded, as he possessed himself of the sheriff's revolver. "Move over toward that wall beside the others!"

The man stood up with a snarl—and hesitated.

Larry pushed him forward with the muzzle of his revolver, judging his direction as best he could in the darkness. He dared not use his flashlight to show her unarmed to Felton. He dared not use it until—ah, he could make out her form now. He reached out and touched her, and quickly pressed Sheriff Laing's revolver into her hand. And then his flashlight played over the scene.

"Back up against the wall—both of you!" he ordered grimly. "That's right—only a little closer together—no, not too close—just so that I can handle you both at once."

The ray of light covered both men now as they stood against the wall. Felton's face was pale with mortification and confusion; Sheriff Laing's was livid with rage—the muscles around his lips were twitching violently, and he shook his fist furiously at Mera Pelenoff as she stood beside Larry.

"You cursed she-devil!" he choked in frenzy, clawing with his other hand at his bruised throat. "So that was your game in the car, was it! Well, by"——

"Hold your tongue!"—there was a cold, merciless fury in Larry's voice. He touched Mera's arm again. "You'll find some heavy cord in the right hand bottom drawer of the desk over there—the desk on this side. Will you get it, please? We'll make these gentlemen comfortable for the night, and with a handkerchief for a gag they"—— Larry, quick as the winking of an eye, threw his arm forward, pushing his revolver muzzle against the sheriff's body. "Quick!" he flung at Mera. "Stand in here against the wall and cover Felton in the same way!"

The flashlight went out. The room was in darkness. A board creaked in the passageway outside.

"If you make a sound, or if Felton makes a sound, I'll drop you, Sheriff, where you stand!" Larry whispered tensely, but loud enough for both to hear.

There was utter silence. The Sheriff and Felton, if from quite other motives, were listening now with as strained attention as either Larry or Mera Pelenoff.

A board creaked again, but very faintly—though the sound was nearer. It was as if, warned by the previous occasion, whoever was there was using more caution than before.

The door began to open. A narrow thread of light, gradually widening, began to steal into the room. And then, a quarter way open, the door remained stationary—as though whoever was without was listening intently for any sound from within. Then, with a single, swift, silent movement, a dark form slipped through the doorway, and the door was closed.

It was black in the room again. The door had been opened so little, the man's entrance so quick, that recognition was impossible—and yet Larry was conscious of a strange, disturbing sense of familiarity.

Not a sound! All was quiet again! Again the intruder appeared to be listening. Then the key turned. The man had locked himself in.

Footsteps crossed the room and paused by the wall near the window. There was a slight thud, as though the man had dropped down on his knees; and then, an instant later, a curious, indeterminate, squeaking, rending noise.

The flashlight, still switched off in Larry's hand, lifted. He knew now—he knew. His brain was riotous with it all. He knew! But just a moment—he must wait—wait until there could be no possibility of refutation. Just a second more and—now!

Across the blackness of the room shot the flashlight's glare. There was a scream, a shriek of terror, of fury, of despair—and in the centre of the round, white ray of light, as though thrown upon a screen, knelt Mason, the paymaster, a package of bank-notes in his hand that he was in the act of taking from a hole beneath a loosened plank in the flooring!

CHAPTER XXV.
At the End of the Run.

IN the living-room compartment of the private car, a half hour later, Mera, half crying, half laughing, her arms about her father, as she perched on the arm of his chair, had told him, a little incoherently, how the paymaster had been caught in the office. And twice, almost as excited as his daughter, the big Russian official had reached out and wrung Larry's hand. But Mr. Pelenoff was still heavy with bewilderment.

"But I can hardly make head or tail of what you have said, Mera," he protested laughingly, patting his daughter's shoulder affectionately. "All I have been able to make out is that Lannigan here is free, and this man Mason is the thief. I don't quite understand. Perhaps you'll be more lucid, Lannigan—eh"—he looked at Larry inquiringly.

Larry, smiling gravely, shook his head thoughtfully.

"The man hated me good and hard, I guess," he said slowly. "I don't know which was the stronger motive with him—the money, or revenge on me for the way I had just handled him. He saw his chance for both, to make one dovetail into the other, I imagine, and—well, he took it. He knew, of course that when he gave the alarm he mustn't have the money on his person and that he couldn't carry it away with him then, and so he hid it temporarily under that loose board in the floor. There wouldn't be any search made in the room, naturally—since I was supposed to have taken the money. He wasn't running any risks that way. But it must have been about all he could do, for he was badly hurt, all right, and it was about three-quarters of an hour from the time I left him until he pretended to regain consciousness for the first time and moaned for help."

Mr. Pelenoff nodded.

"Yes; that part of it is quite plain," he said. "But you? Your being at the office to-night—and Mason coming there, too?"

Mera turned quickly from her father to Larry.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "I don't know either why you went there—you wouldn't tell me to-night. But I was sure it was for something more than just your own things, that you gave as an excuse. Did you suspect Mason all the time?"

"No"—Larry shook his head thoughtfully again—"not all the time. I tried to figure out how it could have been possible for Mason to do it—and discovered that it wouldn't have been impossible. If Mason was the man, he had hidden the money in the office, for I knew he had been taken to the hospital, where of course his clothes had been removed by others, so that he couldn't possibly have had so large and bulky an amount on his person without it having been discovered. Therefore if Mason had had anything to do with it, the money was still in the office. That is why I went there to-night—to search."

Again Mr. Pelenoff nodded.

"But I did explain that, dad," Mera interrupted with a reproachful little pout. "Mason told us why himself in the office there after Sheriff Laing put his handcuffs on him, and while he kept begging the Sheriff to keep Mr. Lannigan away from him. The man was a terror stricken coward. It seems that after the Sheriff's search of Mr. Wilson's house the news began to get around that Larry Lannigan was back and hiding in Angel. Some one went and told Mason. There was only one reason in his guilty and cowardly mind that would account for Mr. Lannigan having dared to come back here—and that was himself. He was afraid that Mr. Lannigan suspected the truth. He did not dare leave the money there any longer, don't you see? He got up out of bed and dressed, and sneaked down to the office and"—— Mera paused suddenly and faced Larry with an expectant smile as the car door opened and a light step sounded an instant later from the corridor. "I sent Mr. Felton for him before we left the office," she explained. "I think he has earned"——

Tommaso bounded into the compartment and flung himself upon Larry.

"Signor! Signor!" he cried. "Oh, I am so glad! I am so glad, signor!"

Larry looked from one to the other. His heart was very full now—too full to permit him to enter into her attempt to pass it all off lightly.

"I know," he said huskily. "I owe you all so much. I owe you all more than"—— And then he could not say any more, and he turned away to the window.

A chair creaked behind him, there was a quick step, and the big Russian's hand fell heartily upon his shoulder.

"You owe more to yourself than you do to any one else," declared Mr. Pelenoff, smiling. "I was talking with my daughter at dinner tonight about you; only then you were not free—and now you are. I told her I needed a man like you, Lannigan, to help me over there in Russia. I want primarily a man who is not only a good railroad man, but a man who is not afraid of anything. There is a big field there; there is a great railroad future—perhaps the greatest, from the viewpoint of possibilities, in the world. You are the man I want. Will you come?"

Larry did not answer. His face grew a little white. It had come very suddenly upon him. To Russia! That meant with her. The answer must be with her. A strange, mad hope and joy surged upon him—and was chilled again. What right had he to hope? She knew, she must know, a woman's intuition would have told her that he cared; but she—she was just loyal and brave and true—to a debt she felt she owed.

It was Mera who spoke.

"Have you forgotten Tommaso, father?" she asked softly.

"Hut, no!" declared Mr. Pelenoff genially. "Tommaso will go, too. Won't you, Tommaso?"

Tommaso looked doubtfully at Larry.

"I do not know," he said. "I will go with Signor Lannigan."

There was a tremulous little smile on Mera's lip as she stepped to the boy's side.

"Your Signor Lannigan seems very hard to persuade"—her voice was one of laughing raillery, but now she had raised her eyes to Larry's. "I—I wonder why! You ask him, Tommaso."

Larry had been searching her face. It was the first time she had looked at him. It was only for an instant, for the long, dark lashes had hidden her eyes again, but now, because there was only laughter in his heart, and a great wonder that was all gladness, he too stepped toward Tommaso. Pink had tinged Mera's oval face into rare loveliness, and in the deep brown eyes, deeper now because they swam in a sudden mist, braver for the shyness that they dared, he had read his answer.

"Tell her, Tommaso," he said; "tell her that we will go."

(The End.)

Can You Beat It?

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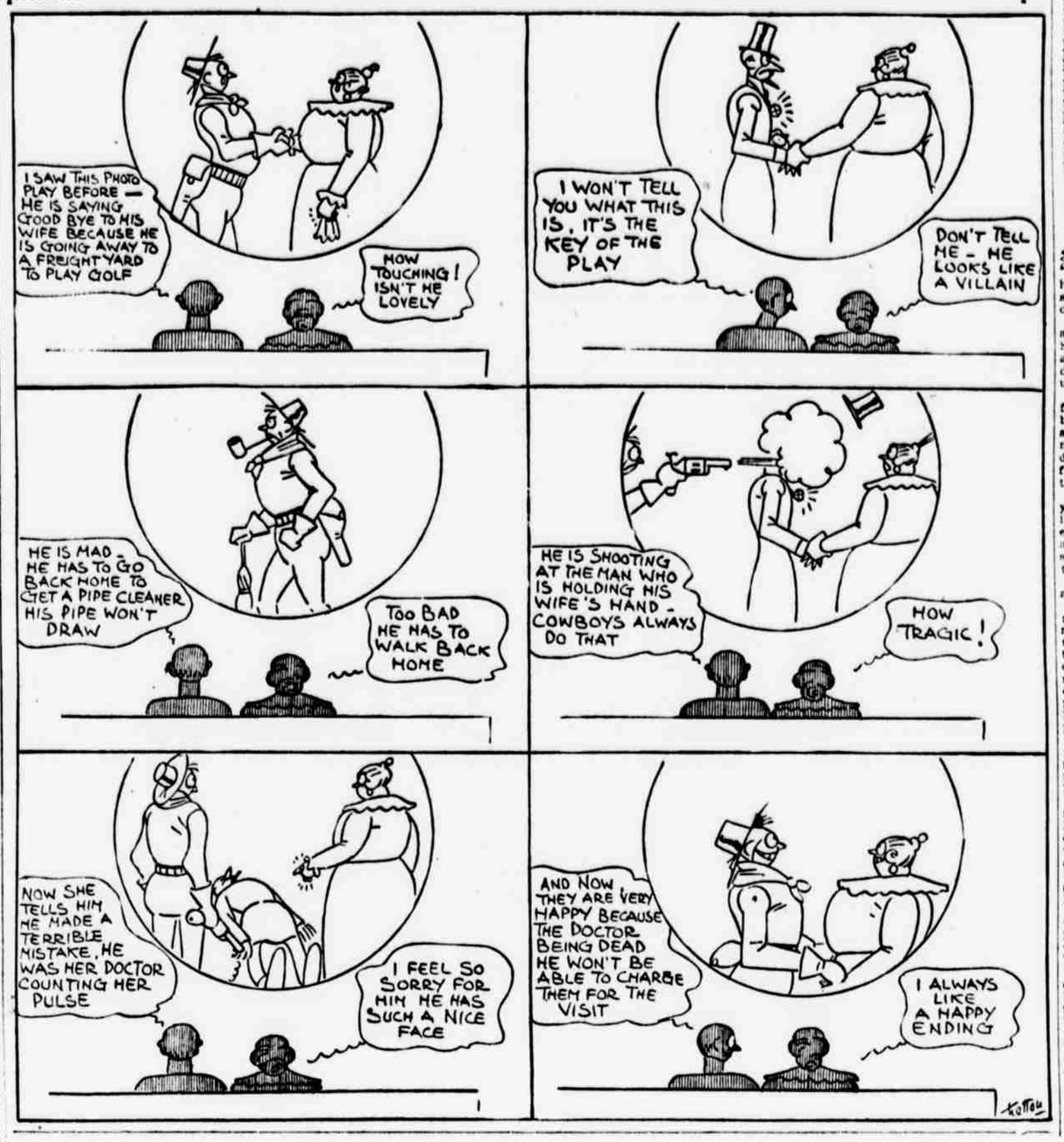
By Maurice Ketten



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