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THE ALTENBURG CASE

By GEORGE DYRE ELDRIDGE

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(Continued.)

"Well," retorted the officer, "you've taken time so you ought to be certain."

Then he stepped from the bushes to the edge of the creek, motioning for the others to remain in the brush, where their chauffeur had joined them, armed with an ugly-looking six-shooter.

The officer called:

"Drop that case and throw up your hands, all three!"

The dancing Canadian paused on one foot, as it were, with his daring "piastre" half spoken; the short, stout man gave a start and let go his hold on the case, but the tall, white-haired man, holding hard to the case, gave one look at the officer, who alone was to be seen across the creek, and darted to the cover of a great pine, behind which he sheltered himself.

"I warn you," the officer called, "that you are covered by a dozen guns besides my own," a warning that would have been more effective had it not been for the ease with which the old man had gained shelter without a shot fired. "Antoine Lavoursie, keep your hands in the air and come across that log. Nick Crossman, stay where you are and keep your hands up!"

The Frenchman came across the narrow log, which served as a bride, with knees shaking under him and a look of fear in his face. Under his breath he still seemed to be saying "Piastre, piastre!"

"Search him!" said the officer, curtly.

The chauffeur came out of the bush, deftly ran his hand over the man and reported:

"Nothing except this courteau," holding up the long hunting knife.

"Handcuff him!"

Out of the bushes on the other side of the creek came the flash of a pistol and the bullet sang over the officer's head. He simply flung back over his shoulder, "Handcuff him, quick," and sent a shot at random into the bush from which the first shot had come.

The old man was cowering behind his tree; Crossman was standing with his hands above his head.

"Crossman, come over here! Hands up!" called the officer.

Another shot came from the bush and carried away the tassel of the officer's capote, the hood of which was drawn over his head. Crossman gave one longing look over his shoulder, shrugged and walked across. He, too, was searched and from him a similar knife was taken.

"Handcuffs!" cried the officer, and again came the shot, this time more wild than before, followed by another that carried away the tassel cord of the capote.

"Now," called the officer, "Noah Clayton, I arrest you in the king's name for the murder of John Altenburg. Throw that dress-suit case over here!"

As the name was spoken the lividly white face of the older man was thrust from behind the tree. He appeared to be taking account of his chances, for he glanced backward, as if prepared to dart to another cover.

Trafford and Grimbleshaw had worked to the right through the brush to a point where they had a better view of the fugitive, and also had him covered wit their pistols. As the man thrust out his head, so that his face was again seen, Grimbleshaw again caught his breath and craned his head forward, studying the man with the utmost intentness.

"Who is that?" he demanded of Trafford, in a voice that had the sound of half sticking in his throat.

"The Altenburg murderer," whispered Trafford.

"But——"

"Hush!" motioned Trafford.

"Throw!" cried the officer.

The man raised his arm to obey, swung the case back once, then forward for the purchase, and finally back to throw, when two pistol shots rang out from the bush behind him, the case dropped from his grasp, his hands went up in the air and he fell backward heavily. His legs and arms moved convulsively once or twice and then he lay ominously still.

The officer, Trafford and the chauffeur fired on the instant into the bush from which the shots came, but Grimbleshaw was too startled to follow their example. A long pole was thrust from the bushes, its hooked end caught in the handles of the case, which was drawn back out of sight. As the officer and chauffeur fired again Trafford dashed to the edge of the creek and called in a voice that sounded as if it might carry for a mile:

"For God's sake, let us have the papers! Put them by the man and take the money!"

The officer turned on him angrily.

"What in h—l did you do that for?" he demanded.

A voice came from the other side:

"Will you give us time to look them over and not fire while we're doing it?"

"Yes," replied Trafford, who had taken full command. "Ten minutes! Confirm it!" he called to the officer.

"All right, if the d—n fool wants to do that way; 'tisn't my funeral," he called.

Then Trafford turned on him.

"Would you cross that run on the promise of that money if you got it?"

"I'd see you in h—l first," the officer answered. "I told you at the start that this was as far as I'd come."

"Then if I get the papers it's more'n you'd do for me now, isn't it?"

"You bet it is," retorted the officer; "but that's no way for an officer of the law to compound a felony!"

"That money's all that's worth anything to them," answered Trafford, "while the papers are worth to some one I know more than all the money in Canada. It takes a blooming Britisher to throw away part because he can't get the whole."

A voice came from the other side:

"What are you so precious particular about those papers for?"

"Because," answered Trafford, "they'll prove the innocence of a man accused of a great crime that that dead wretch there committed; because they'll save a wife and daughter, who've been faithful to the accused for ten years, from sorrow and trouble, and because they're of no earthly use to you."

"Are you an officer?"

"Yes, and one that would catch you if he could."

"Well, you're a trump, anyway," came back. "They don't make 'em that way often and the breed ought to be encouraged. If we put the papers there will you give us your word of honor you won't cross for ten minutes that when you do you'll just take away the papers and the dead man and that you won't attempt to follow us?"

"By God, no," roared the officer.

"Yes," called Trafford.

"All right!" came back. "That bloke don't count, anyway. An ox team couldn't get him across here. He isn't to come, anyway. If he steps foot on this side he's a dead man. Begin to count time!"

The pole was thrust out, the papers laid beside the dead body and Trafford stood on the bank, watch in hand. The officer walked back toward the bushes, but said to the chauffeur as he passed him:

"You'll go over and help them. The scoundrels won't hurt you, but they'll drill me, sure's shooting."

At last Trafford called:

"Time's up! We're coming!"

No answer came, and Trafford, Grimbleshaw and the chauffeur crossed the log. As soon as they reached the body, which lay stone dead, where it had fallen, Trafford seized the papers and passed them to Grimbleshaw.

"Keep them for Miss Judith," he said. "If I know her, they'll be the best wedding present you can make her."

But Grimbleshaw stood speechless, looking at the dead man. Twice he tried to speak and twice failed to find his voice. Then, with a final effort, he gasped:

"Who in God's name is this?"

"This?" answered Trafford. "Oh, this is John Altenburg, the murderer of Noah Clayton. I've known for a fortnight that it wasn't he who was killed at Lanceboro."

XXIX.

GATHERING THE ENDS TOGETHER.

Beckwith had returned from New York, where he had gone to settle, on behalf of the heirs of John Altenburg, with the receivers of the Venezuelan Syndicate. Under instructions he had turned over the entire estate, it being impossible to determine accurately what part might have been acquired honestly, and what part was the proceeds of the embezzlement. Beckwith himself had protested until he was hoarse against such an unbusinesslike act, averring that fair terms of settlement could be obtained that would more than satisfy men who had never looked to obtain a dollar, and still leave a substantial sum for the heirs. Calden, however, had set his face like a flint against such a proposition, and his family had obstinately supported him.

"I'll take no chances of a dollar of that stolen money ever coming to me on mine," he said, and stuck to it.

"But," Beckwith urged, "the estate is far more in amount than the money stolen from the syndicate. If they get their own——"

"That money was the foundation of the whole thing," answered Calden. "I shall draw no line between the two."

So Beckwith was back, feeling that the only part of the affair that approached his ideal was the dismissal of the indictments, the reversal of the order of insanity, and a record of the court that would stand forever as a vindication og Calden and his management of the affairs of the syndicate.

"I'm not saying," explained Beckwith, who felt a little pride in the sweeping character of the court record he had secured, "that all this isn't worth far more than money, but it wasn't an election between the two. These things you should have had, and this other you should not have gone without."

"We are satisfied," said Calden.

"But I'm not!" declared Beckwith. "I suppose, now you don't need me any more, that don't matter."

Calden smiled at the irritation of the lawyer, which was all on behalf of his clients, from whom he had refused to take a cent beyond the retainers.

"It's the first time I've kissed my wife for nearly eleven years," said Calden, "with the feeling that I did so as an absolutely free man," and he stooped and gave her a kiss that brought a flush of new life to her cheek, which had already grown rounder and younger in the weeks that had passed since Trafford came back from Canada with the vindication papers.

Horace Calden kissed his mother and grasped his father's hand.

"It's all right," he said. "I shall never live long enough to wish that we had retained a dollar of that money."

"Nor I," said Judith. "Nothing less would have been right, and you, Mr. Grumbler," she said, turning to Beckwith, "know it as well as we do. I half believe you're ill-humored because you thought you had to advise us otherwise."

"You're a set of obstinate, opinionated idealists!" he exclaimed. "If the world were made up on these lines the lawyers would simply starve. And as for you," he declared, accepting Horace as a means of getting out of his position, "I'm going to give you one mark. You're the worst client a lawyer ever had. If they were all like you starving would be a happy release."

"Oh," said Horace, "you must remember it was my first experience with the tribe. I'll know better next time."

"By the way," said Beckwith, "I've sent word to Trafford that I'm back, and that we want this thing closed up and polished off. He'd no business to have that other case on hand when he came back from Canada, so that he couldn't find time to satisfy our laudable curiosity as to how he blundered on to his solution. Still, I forgive him on the score of his not having time while I was away. He's in town, and has got Grimbleshaw, whom he'll bring round after dinner. Oh, here they are now, I guess. Awful sorry if I've incommoded the doctor in asking him to come here,' he added, with a most scandalously familiar wink to Judith.

"Really,' said Trafford, after greetings had been exchanged, "I don't think it was quite necessary for me to come, for I don't believe there's a thing that Mr. Beckwith couldn't explain to you better than I'm able to."

"Possibly, possibly," admitted Beckwith, "but, at the same time, there'll be a peculiar interest in hearing at first hand some account of your processes, and I shall be glad to submit them to an analysis such as only a lawyer can be expected to give them."

Trafford smiled and went on:

"Perhaps it's time to own up that while I never did have a shred of suspicion regarding Mr. Calden, I can't say that quite as strongly regarding Horace. Still, almost from my first interview with him that vanished, and I saw that his whole trouble was that he suspected his father, and was laying out the ground, as he thought, to step into his place if that suspicion was certified."

"I shall never forgive myself those suspicions," said Horace, penitently.

"Oh, yes, you will," Beckwith assured him. "Why, do you know that but for my legal training I might have fallen into the same error myself? There's really only one thing unforgivable, and that is to engage a counsel and not give him your confidence. That strikes at the very foundation of society."

"Perhaps we were all a little foolish about the business," said Mr. Calden, "and I'm free to admit that I ought to have known Horace better than to have had a moment's suspicion of him; but it was pretty hard lines for all of us, especially with Trafford here, hanging over us like inexorable fate, ready to strike the first chance he saw. Perhaps, on the whole, we did as well as most folk would under the same circumstances."

"But when did you get on the track of Clayton?" asked Horace. "He never quite seemed a surprise to you, Mr. Trafford."

"No. There were too many points that none of the rest of you quite measured up to. Of course, it took time to straighten you all out. Thus, for several days I thought it was Horace who telephoned, but when I came to fit it in with other things that I had got into their places it threw the whole thing out of kilter. But, of course, there never was a moment when that note and the appointment for Tuesday weren't before my eyes. The very fact that I could get nothing regarding the visit, whether it had been made or not, whether it was at the house or the 'usual' place, was suspicious, as showing the extraordinary pains taken to conceal it, if visit there actually was. The stranger who gave the drink to David was also significant. In spite of all my precautions against preconceived theories I could never persuade myself that the incident which took David away from the farm that particular night was a mere coincidence."

"But who was it gave' him the drink, after all?"

"Clayton, of course. Those papers, which, if we had them before, would have shown us how Clayton had for years been threatening Altenburg and living on the money he extorted from him, would have been a tremendous weapon in Clayton's hands. He was after them, and after the money as well, of course. He made his plans Tuesday night and he spent Wednesday in perfecting them. We shall never know, but I'm clear he didn't intend to kill Altenburg. In fact, if he could get the papers and the money Altenburg was worth more to him alive than dead. That money was only a fraction of what Altenburg could command, and if Clayton was in possession of the papers and could get away Altenburg would have been a gold mine. As it is, Altenburg's accounts show that he had given Clayton nearly a hundred thousand dollars in the preceding ten years. By the way, it's interesting how Altenburg was bound by his old methodical habits. Why, his papers were almost a transcript of the Venezuela's transactions, and the greater part of them had no earthy value, excepting to endanger him. Yet, evidently, he couldn't bring himself to destroy them."

"And he didn't even know that an indictment was barred and that he could have defied Clayton for years," said Beckwith, with clearly marked disgust.

"Oh, lawyers are not the only ones who bank on the want of legal training in the general public," suggested Trafford. "However, criminal indictment was not the only thing that a man in Altenburg's position had to fear, and certainly he'd have been in a bad way if Clayton had got hold of those papers. Aside from the drink to David, the only possible indication of a stranger that I could get was the evidence that some one had slept in the attic, and that might have been Mr. Calden."

"And you weren't certain about that until the day you left for Canada," Judith reminded him.

"Certain? Well, we'll let it rest on that word. It's a pretty large one."

"But were you?" Judith urged.

"Well, it was the first time that I had asked the direct question. I felt like giving you a little indication of what was coming, just as when I took you to see where I found the pistol."

"There," broke in Beckwith, "about that pistol. You were away off there! You declared it had ceased to have significance. Don't you remember my showing you how significant it was? I simply demonstrated, yes, that's the word, demonstrated, that it showed the vault to have been robbed after the murder was committed."

"I remember now," Trafford admitted, "and I don't mind adding that the vault and the pistol were what first gave me an inkling that the murdered man wasn't Altenburg. Of course, I'd never seen him, and I hadn't a reason to question the identification by every one who had known him. The utter disappearance of the money and the papers, however, did bother me, and when the second day I discovered the existence of the vault, where I had supposed the fireplace and ovens to be, I assumed I'd find the missing articles.

(To be Continued.)

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