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CHAPTER XV.

EXCITEMENT AT THE DURANT WORKS.

THE Durant gun works was in a fever of excitement. Ever since the forging of the Sommers gun events of importance had happened in such close succession that about the works generally was the feeling of stunned amazement. The office force and even the hands when they met would look at each other fearfully. What would happen next? No one could tell. But all were sure something dreadful might be expected. First had come the fight in the furnace room, when Sommers was nearly killed; then the discharge of Smith, but with the rumor that he had gone to work in another plant controlled by Mr. Durant; next had followed a terrible explosion of the Sommers gun, and now was the shipwreck, the wonderful rescue through the bravery of Sommers and Frances Durant, finally to culminate in a rigid investigation to be held in the Durant works. So no wonder the thousands connected directly and indirectly with the Durant works were in a fever of excitement.

The story of the heroic rescue had been told over and over again. All knew how Frances voluntarily had stayed behind on the wrecked yacht to share apparently certain death with the heroic young naval officer. It was plain that she loved him and he loved her, and all the gossips were straining their imaginations to conjure just what would be the result when the girl's lover was tried at the court martial for the loss of his gun, forged in her father's works.

As soon as the Mongolian reached New York the survivors of the Irvessa had landed. Pinckney hurried to Pittsburg on the first train, but Sommers stayed over a few hours to make the trip with Frances and her mother. Mr. Durant had met them there, and all came on together. The steel man was not given to many words. Sommers was equally undemonstrative. They had wrung each other's hands with mutual respect and esteem, but there had been no words of the relation which all knew must exist between the young officer and Frances. The girl had said nothing. Even her mother was not in her confidence.

On the trip from New York to Pittsburg Mrs. Durant had found time to take up the subject with her husband.

"It's no use, George," she said. "Edward hasn't a chance. That wreck killed any feeling she ever had. We were all in the wireless room, and when he began to bungle and send foolish messages Mr. Sommers just caught him by the collar, pulled him away from the key and put him outside. If you had seen Frances' face then you would know Edward was done. You must give Mr. Sommers every opportunity to clear himself of blame."

George Durant nodded in agreement.

"I'll give him every chance, my dear," he said. "Give him a chance, that's all any man can ask."

Now the day of Sommers' chance was at hand, for Mr. Durant had put his books and the entire force of the works in charge of Bradley to ferret out the truth.

Pinckney, with a few hours' start, hurried to the works as fast as possible. He wanted to meet Marsh before the investigation began. He must know what Marsh had told Bradley. Their stories must agree. But the first blurted question brought another surprise to the chief conspirator.

"I haven't seen any secret service man. There hasn't been any around here," protested Marsh.

Pinckney shook his head impatiently.

"Don't be foolish, Marsh. You saw him and talked to him. He questioned you here nearly a month ago. His name was Bradley."

Marsh, thoroughly frightened at the idea of secret service men working on a case, could only redouble his protest.

"I haven't seen him. I haven't talked to anybody I didn't know in a month."

Pinckney gave a relieved sigh.

"Then he bluffed me," he said. "But now listen. This investigation is coming off today. We're all right. If you keep your head for half an hour you can't go wrong. And we begin work on a government contract for the Rhinestrom tomorrow."

"What must I say?" inquired the inventor of the Rhinestrom gun weakly.

"Swear that Smith was drunk and say that I and Sommers were in the furnace room when the gun went into the tempering bath. Then Bradley can't prove anything to save his life. Don't let him frighten you. He'll try to, but keep your nerve. If he asks you about the Rhinestrom gun don't know anything about it."

Marsh, naturally nervous, was now trembling with fear.

"You know of those killed and wounded, Mr. Pinckney. We both deserve state's prison for it."

Pinckney grabbed the little man by the shoulder to shake some courage into him.

"Don't get chicken hearted, you fool," he cried angrily. "I feel as bad about the accident as you do, but we can't think of that now. It's state's prison or a fortune for you, Marsh. Now keep your nerve. How did we know the gun was going to explode? I never thought it would stand the test at the proving ground. Come on in the office, and I'll give you a drink to brace you."

They were still in the inner room when Bradley, cool and debonair, as usual, strolled into the outer office.

"How are you?" he said genially to Mazie O'Brien, the pretty stenographer, pegging away in one corner at her machine. "I was looking for Mr. Pinckney."

"He's in the inner office with Mr. Marsh," responded the girl.

Bradley nodded.

"Sure. He sent for Marsh as soon as he came, didn't he?"

"Yes," replied the girl curiously. "How did you know that?"

Bradley smiled.

"Mind reader," he suggested, then added, with a serious explanation, "I have an engagement with him, so I thought they'd be waiting for me."

"Shall I tell him you are here?" asked the stenographer.

Bradley made a hasty objection.

"Oh, no; don't bother. I'll wait till they get through. I was just going to see them on a little business about the Rhinestrom gun. And that reminds me. Give me Mr. Rhinestrom's address, won't you? I have to drop him a letter."

"Rhinestrom's address?" she asked curiously.

The man nodded.

"Sure. Rhinestrom, the inventor of the gun they're making here. Can't you give me his address? If you don't remember it look at the last letter you sent him."

"Why, I've never sent him any letters," Mazie returned curiously. "If you want his address, why don't you get it from Mr. Pinckney?"

Bradley smiled.

"That's a good idea," he said. "I'll just do that. You take all Mr. Pinckney's dictation, don't you?"

The girl had begun to wonder at the questioning. Bradley looked well and was pleasant. But what did he want?

"Yes, I take Mr. Pinckney's dictation," she agreed cautiously.

"And he's never written to Rhinestrom?" demanded Bradley, with sudden sternness.

For a moment the girl flared up.

"Say, who are you anyhow? What do you want? Are you trying to pump me?"

Her questioner smiled blandly.

"Oh, please don't suggest such a thing," he said. "I'm going in the works now to see a man named O'Leary. When Mr. Durant comes tell him that Mr. Bradley of the secret service is in the works, then send for me. Goodby. Much obliged for what you had to tell me."

Mazie O'Brien leaned back in her chair, looking after Bradley with a curious expression on her face.

"Well, what do you think of that?" she said to herself at last in astonishment. "Him a detective! Well, he's a pretty good looking fellow—for a detective. I wonder what's up. I remember he was around here a month ago."

Ten minutes later the detective was back in the office in time to meet Frances entering with Lieutenant Sommers.

"I'm glad you're here, Miss Durant," he declared earnestly. "Would you mind if I ask you some questions on investigation?"

The girl smiled at the idea.

"Will I mind?" she exclaimed. "You know I'll do anything in the world I can to clear Mr. Sommers of any blame. Have you found out anything so far?"

Bradley shook his head.

"I've got no positive proof, but I think I shall have before this investigation is over."

"And Mr. Sommers will be cleared when he goes before the court of inquiry at Washington?" persisted the girl.

Bradley bowed.

"I certainly hope so, Miss Durant. You know how much I owe to Mr. Sommers and to you. I feel sure he is innocent of any neglect or wrongdoing, and you can depend on me to work my head off to clear him. Everything will depend, however, on what I can get from Marsh."

Frances looked surprised.

"I can't think Marsh is guilty," she admitted anxiously. "He's been in the works for years, and nothing's ever been said against him."

Bradley nodded.

"I know all that, Miss Durant. But may I tell you a secret? I believe Marsh is the inventor of the Rhinestrom gun, and if I can prove that the rest is easy."

"And if you can't?" the girl asked fearfully.

Bradley smiled with confidence.

"I never let myself look on that side," he said. "Now I must leave you. I'll be back in a few minutes."

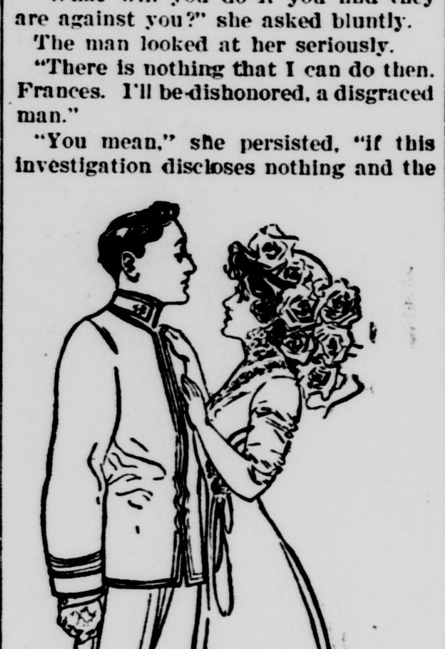
When the door had closed on Bradley the girl turned impulsively to Sommers at her side.

"What will you do if you find they are against you?" she asked bluntly.

The man looked at her seriously.

"There is nothing that I can do then, Frances. I'll be dishonored, a disgraced man."

"You mean," she persisted, "if this investigation discloses nothing and the court of inquiry at Washington finds against you that you will not come back to me?"



"You need not come back to me, for I will come to you."

An expression of pain crossed Sommers' face, but his answer came out straight:

"How could I come back to you, dear? A cashiered naval officer, disgraced for life, couldn't come to you. I couldn't ask that sacrifice of you."

Impulsively the girl had laid her hand on his arm.

"Then listen, dearest," she said softly, but with determination that would not be denied. "If the Washington authorities place the blame of the accident upon you, if you are dishonored and disgraced, you need not come back to me." She paused a moment, then added softly, raising her eyes to him, "You need not come back to me, for I will come to you."

CHAPTER XVI.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

THE inquiry at the Durant works to establish responsibility for the failure of the Sommers gun was simply organized. Mr. Durant put the entire matter in the hands of Bradley, giving him authority to question everybody connected with the work and if possible to bring out the entire truth. Besides Bradley and Mr. Durant, Pinckney, Sommers, Frances and the stenographer, Mazie O'Brien, were the only ones allowed at the examination.

"I want you to understand, Mr. Bradley," declared the steel man before they began, "that I and my plant are entirely at your service. I am as anxious as you to find just where the blame lies, and if any men in my employ are responsible I can assure you they will be punished."

Bradley bowed.

"I am convinced of your sincerity, sir," he said, "and I shall take full advantage of your offer."

"Whom do you wish to question first?" asked Durant.

"Marsh," replied the secret service man promptly.

The owner of the plant immediately sent a boy to call the head draughtsman.

"And after Marsh?" he suggested. "We might as well have the names of all the witnesses, so we can call them quickly.

Bradley smiled.

"The second witness will also be Marsh."

"And the third?" suggested the puzzled steel man.

"Marsh again," came the grim reply.

Mr. Durant looked up surprised, a little startled.

"You have settled on Marsh, then, as the guilty man?"

Bradley shook his head.

"Oh, by no means, Mr. Durant. I am merely getting at the truth."

Pinckney had been sitting grimly, his brows drawn down, listening to the talk of Durant and the secret service man. Now he broke in with some impatience:

"I don't think this is treating Marsh fair, Mr. Durant. This detective's attitude is apt to prejudice you against a capable and proved faithful workman."

Mr. Durant turned on Pinckney, surprised.

"I don't think, Edward," he said, "that I am apt to be prejudiced against a good workman merely because he's asked a few questions. Mr. Bradley may want to ask you some questions, but I don't think that can prejudice me against you."

Before Pinckney could reply Marsh entered. He was in his shirt sleeves, having just come from his desk, and he stood beside the door, looking about the room furtively, suspiciously, fearfully. Mr. Durant smiled in friendly fashion, for Marsh had worked many years at the plant, and he liked him immensely.

"Marsh," began the steel man, "this is Mr. Bradley of the United States secret service. He wants to ask you some questions about forging the Sommers gun. I want you to tell him everything you know in connection with that affair."

"Yes, sir," replied the head draughtsman, but his tone was so weak that Pinckney, fearful of his fellow conspirator's strength and courage, broke in almost angrily:

"Marsh was not in charge of that job, and consequently he"— Bradley turned quickly. His smile was just as bland, but in his voice there was a steely touch that showed that he would not brook interference.

"Marsh was not in charge of that job."

"I'll do the talking, if you please, Mr. Pinckney."

"But, I tell you, he had nothing to do with it," insisted the general manager angrily.

Bradley turned to Mr. Durant.

"I understood that I was to have full swing here, Mr. Durant?"

The owner of the works nodded.

"Now, Marsh, who was in charge of that job?"

"Smith," replied the witness.

"Was he drunk?"

Marsh hesitated, looking weakly from Sommers to Pinckney.

"Yes, sir, he was," came the admission at last frankly.

Bradley's smile did not change as he asked his next question in the same pleasant tone.

"Why, then, was he allowed to be in charge?"

"Well, we were all there to keep watch of him," he faltered at last.

The questioner looked puzzled.

"Whom do you mean by we?" he asked.

"Mr. Pinckney and me and"— The witness faltered, and Pinckney ended for him sharply:

"And Mr. Sommers."

"Yes, and Mr. Sommers," agreed Marsh eagerly.

The smile had left Bradley's face when he turned coldly to Pinckney.

"I am not questioning you, Mr. Pinckney. I may question you shortly, and I hope when I do you'll be as eager to answer. Then he turned back to the rattled witness. "Was Smith discharged?"

"I—I think so," faltered the head draughtsman. "He was drunk, and he was discharged, because Mr. Durant never allows that."

"When was he discharged?"

"I don't remember exactly."

"But he's working in Meadville in your new plant now, isn't he?" came the next sharp question that brought a startled surprise to Mr. Durant, because one of the cardinal rules of the Durant works was never to take back a man discharged for inefficiency or drunkenness.

The steel man turned in his chair to look sharply at Pinckney, for Pinckney was also acting manager of the Meadville plant. The question had thrown Pinckney into a secret panic, while Marsh was openly flustered. If this detective had found Smith carefully hidden away under an assumed name in the Meadville plant, what might he not know?

"I—I heard he was in Meadville," faltered the conspirator under fire.

He looked appealingly at Pinckney, but Bradley, the imperturbable, gave him no rest.

"What time of day did that gun go into the furnace, Mr. Marsh?"

Again Marsh looked hopelessly for the help that could not be given.

"I don't know, sir," he said at last.

Bradley lifted his eyebrows, surprised.

"But you told Lieutenant Sommers it was going in at 6 o'clock," he said sternly. "Didn't you tell him that?"

The witness was in a panic now. He did not know which way to turn.

Mr. Durant was looking at him sharply. The shrewd steel man was beginning to realize that there was something back of all this, something discreditable, and he sat there, his face getting grimmer and grimmer and his jaws setting harder with each sharp question and faltering reply—sat there sternly waiting to administer justice so soon as guilt could be proved.

"I think I did," admitted Marsh at last.

"But you don't know?" persisted Bradley.

"Not for sure," the witness faltered.

The detective said nothing to that, but his smile spoke volumes. Pinckney saw it and moved uneasily. Marsh caught it, and a cold chill began to race up and down his spine. But apparently Bradley was satisfied along that line, for the next question branched to another side.

"If the gun had gone in the furnace at 6, when was it to come out, Marsh?"

"About 2."

"And it came out at a quarter past 12, so it must have gone in between 3 and 4, mustn't it?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose; I believe it must sir," faltered the witness painfully.

The next question was put like a shot.

"Did you ever invent a gun?"

Marsh's mouth dropped open. His face became chalky. His eyes rolled about the room piteously, seeking for aid, but none was there. He saw only the grim, stern face of Mr. Durant, the hard eyes of Pinckney, with a terrible contempt and fear in back of them; the eager, determined look of Sommers, the anxious fearfulness of Frances, and, lastly, the cold, calm, deadly smiling man who questioned him. With a gasp and gulp he managed to collect himself.

"No, sir," he said firmly.

"What? You mean to tell me you never invented a gun?" demanded Bradley sternly.

Marsh thought he caught a hint of disappointment in the tone, and it gave him courage.

But the disappointment, if there was any, was hidden promptly by the sneering smile of the secret service man as he said:

"Why, you surprise me, Mr. Marsh. Then you don't know Mr. Rhinestrom?"

"No, sir," he faltered.

Bradley merely smiled.

"You've never seen him here, Mr. Marsh?"

"No, sir," reiterated Marsh more firmly.

Bradley's next question was still hurled at the same point.

"Has he ever been at the works, Mr. Marsh?"

Marsh looked about again wildly.

"I don't know," he blurted at last.

"Ah, very interesting," smiled Bradley. "You don't know Mr. Rhinestrom? You've never seen him? You don't know whether or not he's ever been at the works? You've never invented a gun yourself, of course. And the one thing you do know is that Mr. Rhinestrom is the inventor of the gun you are in charge of forging. You are sure of that, aren't you, Mr. Marsh? Take your time. Don't be in a hurry with your answer. All we want is the truth. Now, you know Mr. Rhinestrom is the inventor of the gun, don't you?"

There was so much satirical contempt in the way the question was put that the cold sweat broke out on Marsh. He looked helplessly at Pinckney and in his hard eyes read desperation, but not despair. Pinckney, crooked though he might be, still had all the courage of the really big villain. The sight of his courage helped Marsh to falter out his answer.

"Yes, sir."

The next question was entirely unexpected.

"What royalty does Rhinestrom receive for the gun, Mr. Marsh?"

There was a long pause. Marsh looked about helplessly. Quite obviously he was going to pieces. Pinckney knew that question must not be answered. It meant everything. If Marsh told what he thought the real royalty might come out and the true inventor, in desperation and anger, would blurt the truth. It must be stopped. Pinckney sprang to his feet.

"This is ridiculous," he exclaimed. "These questions are all silly. What does Marsh know about all this? How can Marsh know anything about royalties?"

Bradley turned to the owner of the works.

"Mr. Durant, will you kindly tell Marsh what royalty you pay this Rhinestrom?"

The steel man looked puzzled, angry. He did not understand the drift of the questioning. He had not the slightest suspicion that Marsh was the real inventor of the Rhinestrom gun, and so, quite naturally, he looked on the questions regarding royalty as entirely unnecessary prying into a business secret. For a moment he did not reply, and Bradley repeated his question. Then Pinckney broke in angrily.

"I thought Mr. Bradley came here to inquire into the Sommers gun," he sneered.

The secret service man kept his temper as he turned to Mr. Durant, to speak in a tone of polite regret.

"You invited me here, Mr. Durant, to ask such questions as I saw fit to get at the facts concerning the destruction of a gun. Do I understand you refuse to answer the first question?"

Mr. Durant hesitated.

"But this is a private business matter," he protested at last. "I see no bearing in that question on the matter in hand."

Bradley shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he said regretfully. "I ask it only for Mr. Marsh's information."

"What has Marsh got to do with what I pay for patents?" exclaimed Durant angrily.

Bradley, still unruffled, turned to Marsh with a smile.

"Suppose you tell him, Marsh," he suggested.

"Nothing at all, sir," the inventor muttered hastily.

Pinckney would have broken in again, but the detective stopped him sharply with a gesture.

"Wait! Marsh, can you tell me straight to my face that it would mean nothing to you to know that Mr. Durant pays a royalty for the Rhinestrom gun of a thousand dollars an inch?"

An expression of amazement swept over the face of the badgered witness.

"One thousand!" he gasped; then he stopped short, looking at Pinckney venomously. The chief conspirator caught the look and realized its danger.

"Marsh won't believe," he cried hastily. But again Bradley cut in, stepping between Pinckney and the witness so that neither could see the other.

"Keep quiet, Mr. Pinckney," he demanded sternly. "I can prove what I say. Now, Marsh, what do you say to a royalty of a thousand dollars an inch?"

The little man was past the stage of fear now. He saw the whole trick. He realized how he had been duped. He had only to tell the truth and ruin both Pinckney and himself, but then he hesitated. To tell the truth—what would that mean? It would mean state prison possibly and disgrace. And Marsh was not big enough to take a great revenge. Finally he looked down.

"Nothing," he said at last.

"Nothing!" demanded Bradley.

Again Mr. Durant interfered.

"Mr. Bradley," he exclaimed sharply, "I see no reason for your questions or your attitude. I can't for the life of me see what you are getting at."

"I can," supplemented Pinckney, sneering. "I've had experience with Mr. Bradley's style of bluff."

Bradley paid no attention to the general manager, but turned, speaking to Mr. Durant, but looking at Marsh.

"I will explain, Mr. Durant. Lieutenant Sommers is an honest man. It is to him and the girl he loves that Mr. Pinckney and your wife and I and a score of others owe our lives. Tomorrow he is to answer in Washington for an accident in which two men were killed and others maimed and crippled for life. One man is totally blind." A sharp intake of breath and a gasp of horror from Marsh made him pause, then repeat over solemnly with emphasis: "One forever and ever blind, a lad of twenty, who must grope his way through this world to the end of his way." Marsh was shuddering now, for the picture brought up to him that other lad of twenty, his own son, who had died blind. With inexorable coolness Bradley continued:

"I know Lieutenant Sommers is blameless in this affair, and I am here to find some one to answer the cry of justice which comes through the tears and sobs of the mothers, sisters and sweethearts of those boys. And I'll find him, Mr. Durant; I'll find him."

A pitiful picture was Marsh, half stooped, half crouched, shuddering with horror at the thought of what he had helped to do. Frances saw and completely misunderstood his attitude. Her eyes filled with tears of sympathy. She stepped over and put her hand gently on the arm of the shuddering man.

"Mr. Bradley, I beg of you not to question Mr. Marsh any further," she pleaded. "I'm sure if Mr. Marsh knew anything about the forging he would tell you. No one knows the horrors of that accident better than he. No one could know. He had a son who was blinded in an accident"—

Her voice grew very gentle as she continued: "I was with him at his boy's bedside when he died. I know the anguish that he felt then." She let her arm slip gently around the old man's shoulder. "And I know if there was anything to tell he"—

She got no further, for, with a shuddering cry of terrible anguish, the man drew away from her arm.

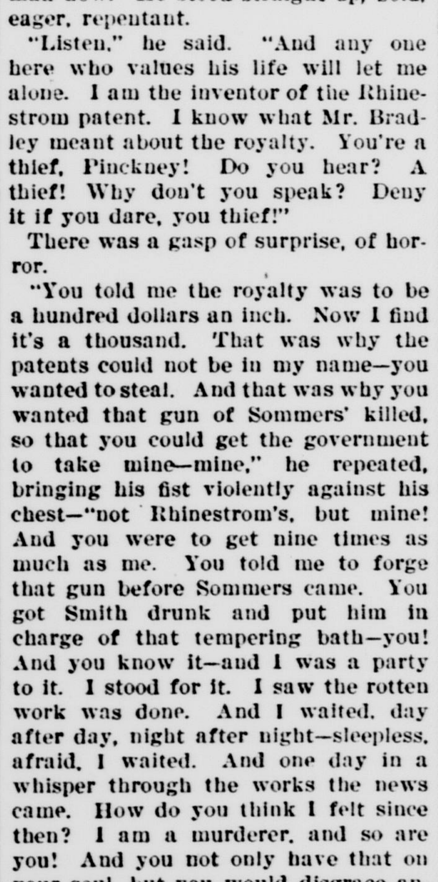
"Don't," he moaned—"don't say any more! I can't stand it. I'm going to strip my soul naked to God and end this."

He stood up straight to face Bradley, no longer the frightened, shuddering coward, with a guilty secret, but a man who had done wrong and knew it, a repentant sinner eager to tell all. There was a look not merely of anguish, but almost of exaltation, on his face. Pinckney saw it and made his last desperate appeal.

"Here, Marsh!" he shouted sharply.

But the little man was past his influence now. He faced his former bully, wide eyed, unafraid, desperate.

"If you speak to me again, as there is a God above us, I will kill you where you stand!" he said in a low, tense voice of fury. Then with a quick move he reached to his pocket,



"You're a thief, Pinckney! Do you hear?"

and the watchers saw the gleam of a pistol. They did not know the little man now. He stood straight up, bold, eager, repentant.

"Listen," he said. "And any one here who values his life will let me alone. I am the inventor of the Rhinestrom patent. I know what Mr. Bradley meant about the royalty. You're a thief, Pinckney! Do you hear? A thief! Why don't you speak? Deny it if you dare, you thief!"

There was a gasp of surprise, of horror.

"You told me the royalty was to be a hundred dollars an inch. Now I find it's a thousand. That was why the patents could not be in my name—you wanted to steal. And that was why you wanted that gun of Sommers' killed, so that you could get the government to take mine—mine," he repeated, bringing his fist violently against his chest—"not Rhinestrom's, but mine! And you were to get nine times as much as me. You told me to forge that gun before Sommers came. You got Smith drunk and put him in charge of that tempering bath—you! And you know it—and I was a party to it. I stood for it. I saw the rotten work was done. And I waited, day after day, night after night—sleepless, afraid, I waited. And one day in a whisper through the works the news came. How do you think I felt since then? I am a murderer, and so are you! And you not only have that on your soul, but you would disgrace another man. The dead are enough for me." His face took on a look of awful, supernatural fear as he went on. "They whispered to me in the night, and the sightless eyes of the lad, blinded, blink at me through the darkness. And it's the face of my boy with sightless eyes accusing me. I won't stand it, I tell you. I'm going with my soul naked to the lash before my God and cry for pity and forgiveness."

Amazed, horror stricken, finally dumfounded, the listeners had hung spellbound through the terrible confession. When it was finished for one moment no one moved. Then Marsh, with a little, gasping catch in his throat, turned and walked quickly out of the office, and as he went through the door they saw a gleam of his revolver. The door closed, and Bradley, the first to recover, sprang toward it, but even the quick secret service man was too late. He jerked open the door. There came a sharp report. Bradley stepped back inside and closed the door.

"He's gone," he said.

Next Pinckney, as one coming out of a daze, looked up, and the secret service man touched him sharply on the arm. Those curiously shrewd, hard eyes were looking into the eyes of the general manager, and in that look Pinckney read that the game was up.

"Will you come with me, Mr. Pinckney?" Bradley's voice was courteous, polite and cold and hard as steel. "I hope you won't make any trouble. I don't care to walk you out handcuffed before the men."

The chief conspirator, cool to the last, nodded.

"I'll come," he said curtly. Then, accompanied by Bradley and followed by Mr. Durant, he walked out coolly to the door through which Marsh had gone to death.

The stenographer already had taken her departure. Sommers and Frances were alone.

"My own!" he whispered.

The girl's arms slipped up about his neck naturally.

"Let us go away," she murmured. "Take me home."

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