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The Manager Of the B. & A.

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CHAPTER III.

OAKLEY took the satchel from General Cornish's hand as the latter stepped from his private car.

"You got my note, I see," he said. "I think I'll go to the hotel for the rest of the night."

He glanced back over his shoulder as he turned with Dan toward the bus which was waiting for them at the end of the platform.

"I guess no one else got off here. It's not much of a railroad center."

"No," agreed Oakley impartially; "there are towns where the traffic is heavier."

Arrived at the hotel, Oakley led the way upstairs to the general's room. It adjoined his own. Cornish paused on the threshold until he had lighted the gas.

"Light the other burner, will you?" he requested. "There, thanks, that's better."

He was a portly man of sixty, with a large head and heavy face. His father had been a Vermont farmer, a man of position and means according to the easy standard of his times.

When the civil war broke out young Cornish, who was just commencing the practice of the law, had enlisted as a private in one of the first regiments raised by his state. Prior to this he had overworked with fervid oratory and had tried hard to look like Daniel Webster, but a skirmish or two opened his eyes to the fact that the waging of war was a sober business and the polishing off of his sentences not nearly as important as the polishing off of the enemy.

He was still willing to die for the Union if there was need of it, but while his life was spared it was well to get on. The numerical importance of numbers was a belief too firmly implanted in his nature to be overthrown by any patriotic aberration.

His own merits, which he was among the first to recognize, and the solid backing his father was able to give won him promotion. He had risen to the command of a regiment, and when the war ended was brevetted a brigadier general of volunteers along with a score of other anxious warriors who wished to carry the title of general back into civil life, for he was an amiable sort of a Shylock, who seldom overlooked his pound of flesh, and he usually got all and a little more than was coming to him.

After the war he married and went west, where he resumed the practice of his profession, but he soon abandoned it for a commercial career. It was not long until he was ranked as one of the rich men of his state. Then he turned his attention to politics. He was twice elected to congress and served one term as governor. One of his daughters had married an Italian prince, a meek, prosaic little creature exactly five feet three inches tall. Another was engaged to an English earl, whose debts were a remarkable achievement for so young a man. His wife now divided her time between Paris and London. She didn't think much of New York, which had thought even less of her. He managed to see her once or twice a year. Any oftener would have been superfluous.

There were moments, however, when he felt his life to be wholly unsatisfactory. He derived very little pleasure from all the luxury that had accumulated about him and which he accepted with a curious placid indifference. He would have liked the affection of his children, to have had them at home, and there was a remote period in his past when his wife had inspired him with a sentiment at which he could only wonder. He held it against her that she had not understood.

He lurched down solidly into the chair Oakley placed for him. "I hope you are comfortable here," he said kindly.

"Oh, yes." He still stood.

"Sit down," said Cornish. "I don't, as a rule, believe in staying up after midnight to talk business, but I must start east tomorrow."

He slipped out of his chair and began to pace the floor, with his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets. "I want to talk over the situation here. I don't see that the road is ever going to make a dollar. I've an opportunity to sell it to the M. and W. Of course this is extremely confidential. It must not go any further. I am told they will discontinue it beyond this point, and of course they will either move the shops away or close them." He paused in his rapid walk. "It's too bad it never paid. It was the first thing I did when I came west. I thought it a pretty big thing then. I have always hoped it would justify my judgment, and it promised to for awhile until the lumber interests played out. Now, what do you advise, Oakley? I want

to get your views, you understand. I sell I won't lose much. The price offered will just about meet the mortgage I hold, but I guess the stockholders will come out at the little end of the horn."

Oakley understood exactly what was ahead of the stockholders if the road changed hands. Perhaps his face showed that he was thinking of this, for the general observed charitably:

"It's unfortunate, but you can't mix sentiment in a transaction of this sort. I'd like to see them all get their money back, and more too."

His mental attitude toward the world was one of generous liberality, but he had such excellent control over his impulses that, while he always seemed about to embark in some large philanthropy, he had never been known to take even the first step in that direction. In short, he was hard and unemotional, but with a deceptive, unswerving kindness of manner which, while it had probably never involved a dollar of his riches, had at divers times cost the unwary and the indiscreet much money.

"I am sure the road could be put on a paying basis," said Oakley. "Certain quite possible economies would do that. Of course we can't create business; there is just so much of it, and we get it all as it is. But the shops might be made very profitable. I have secured a good deal of work for them and I shall secure more. I had intended to propose a number of reforms, but if you are going to sell, why, there's no use of going into the matter"—He paused.

The general meditated in silence for a moment.

"I'd hate to sacrifice my interests if I thought you could even make the road pay expenses. Now, just what do you intend to do?"

"I'll get my order book and show you what's been done for the shops," said Oakley, rising with alacrity. "I have figured out the changes, too, and you can see at a glance just what I propose doing."

The road and the shops employed some 500 men, most of whom had their homes in Antioch. Oakley knew that if the property was sold it would practically wipe the town out of existence. The situation was full of interest for him. If Cornish approved and told him to go ahead with his reforms, it would be an opportunity such as he had never known.

He went into his own room, which opened off Cornish's, and got his order book and table of figures, which he had carried up from the office that afternoon.

He had taken a great deal of pains with his figures, and they seemed to satisfy Cornish that the road if properly managed was not such a hopeless proposition after all. Something might be done with it.

Oakley rose in his good esteem. He had liked him, and he was justifying his good opinion. He beamed benevolently on the young man and thawed out of his habitual reserve into a genial, ponderous frankness.

"You have done well," he said, glancing through the order book, with evident satisfaction.

"Of course," explained Oakley. "I am going to make a cut in wages this spring if you agree to it, but I haven't the figures for this yet." The general nodded. He approved of cuts on principle.

"That's always a wise move," he said. "Will they stand it?"

"They'll have to." And Oakley laughed rather nervously. He appreciated that his reforms were likely to make him very unpopular in Antioch. "They shouldn't object. If the road changes hands it will kill their town."

"I suppose so," agreed Cornish indifferently.

"And half a loaf is lots better than no bread," added Oakley. Again the general nodded his approval.

"What sort of shape is the shop in?" he asked after a moment's silence.

"Very good on the whole."

"I am glad to hear you say so. I spent over a hundred thousand dollars on the plant originally."

"Of course the equipment can hardly be called modern, but it will do for the sort of work for which I am bidding," Oakley explained.

"Well, it will be an interesting problem for a young man, Oakley. If you pull the property up it will be greatly to your credit. I was going to offer you another position, but we will let that go over for the present. I am very much pleased, though, with all you have done; very much pleased indeed. I go abroad in about two weeks. My youngest daughter is to be married in London to the Earl of Minchester." The title rolled glibly from the great man's lips. "So you'll have

the night, if it is a night, all to yourself. I'll see that Holloway does what you say. He's the only one you'll have to look to in my absence, but you won't be able to count on him for anything. He gets limp in a crisis. Just don't make the mistake of asking his advice."

"I'd rather have no advice," interrupted Dan hastily, "unless it's yours," he added.

"I'll see that you are not bothered. You are the sort of fellow who will do better with a free hand, and that is what I intend you shall have."

"Thank you," said Oakley, his heart warming with the other's praise.

"I shall be back in three months, and then if your schemes have worked out



"You have done well," he said, at all as we expect, why, we can consider putting the property in better shape." (A part of Oakley's plan.)

"As you say, it's gone down so there won't be much but the right of way presently."

"I hope that eventually there'll be profits," said Oakley, whose mind was beginning to reach out into the future.

"I guess the stockholders will drop dead if we ever earn a dividend. That's the last thing they are looking forward to," remarked Cornish dryly. "Will you leave a 6:30 call at the office for me? I forgot, and I must take the first train. Good night."

CHAPTER IV.

THE next morning Oakley saw General Cornish off on the 7:15 train, and then went back to his hotel for breakfast. Afterward, on his way to the office, he mailed a check to Ezra Hart for his father. The money was intended to meet his expenses in coming west.

He was very busy all that day making out his new schedules and in figuring the cuts and just what they would amount to. He approached his task with a certain reluctance, for it was as unpleasant to him personally as it was necessary to the future of the road, and he knew that no halfway measure would suffice. He must cut, as a surgeon cuts, to save. By lopping away a man here and there, giving his work to some other man or dividing it up among two or three men, he managed to peel off \$2,000 on the year. He counted that a very fair day's work.

He would start his reform with no particular aggressiveness. He would retire the men he intended to dismiss from the road one at a time. He hoped they would take the hint and hunt other positions. At any rate, they could not get back until he was ready to take them back, as Cornish had assured him he would not be interfered with. He concluded not to hand the notices and orders to Miss Walton, the typewriter, to copy. She might let drop some word that would give his victims an inkling of what was in store for them. He knew there were unpleasant scenes ahead of him, but there was no need to anticipate. When at last his figures for the cuts were complete he would have been grateful for some one with whom to discuss the situation. All at once his responsibilities seemed rather heavier than he had bargained for.

There were only two men in the office besides himself—Phillip Kerr, the treasurer, and Byron Holt, his assistant. They were both busy with the payroll, as it was the 6th of the month, and they commenced to pay off in the shops on the 10th.

He had little or no use for Kerr, who still showed where he dared in small things his displeasure that an outsider had been appointed manager of the road. He had counted on the place for himself for a number of years, but a succession of managers had come and gone apparently without its ever having occurred to General Cornish that an excellent executive was literally spoiling in the big, bare general offices of the line.

This singular indifference on the part of Cornish to his real interests had soured a disposition that at its best had more of acid in it than anything

else. As there was no way in which he could make his resentment known to the general, even if he had deemed such a course expedient, he took it out of Oakley and kept his feelings for him on ice. Meanwhile he bided his time, hoping for Oakley's downfall and his own eventful recognition.

With the assistant treasurer Dan's relations were entirely cordial. Holt was a much younger man than Kerr, as frank and open as the other was secret and reserved. When the 6 o'clock whistle blew he glanced up from his work and said:

"I wish you'd wait a moment, Holt. I want to see you."

Kerr had already gone home, and Miss Walton was adjusting her hat before a bit of a mirror that hung on the wall back of her desk. "All right," responded Holt cheerfully.

"Just draw up your chair," said Oakley, handing his papers to him. At first Holt did not understand; then he began to whistle softly and fell to checking off the various cuts with his forefinger.

"What do you think of the job, Byron?" inquired Oakley.

"Well, I'm glad I don't get laid off, that's sure. Say, just bear in mind that I'm going to be married this summer."

"You needn't worry; only I didn't know that."

"Well, please don't forget it, Mr. Oakley."

Holt ran over the cuts again. Then he asked:

"Who's going to stand for this? You or the old man? I hear he was in town last night."

"I stand for it, but of course he approves."

"I'll bet he approves," and the assistant treasurer grinned. "This is the sort of thing that suits him right down to the ground."

"How about the hands? Do you know if they are members of any union?"

"No, but there'll be lively times ahead for you. They are a great lot of kickers here."

"Wait until I get through. I haven't touched the shops yet. That's to come later. I'll skin closer before I'm done."

Oakley got up and lit his pipe. "The plant must make some sort of a showing. We can't continue at the rate we have been going. I suppose you know what sort of shape it would leave the town in if the shops were closed."

"Very poor shape, I should say. Why, it's the money that goes in and out of this office twice a month that keeps the town alive. It couldn't exist a day without that."

"Then it behooves us to see to it that nothing happens to the shops or road. I am sorry for the men I am laying off,

but it can't be helped."

"I see you are going to chuck Hoadley out of his good thing at the Junction. If he was half white he'd a gone long ago. He must lay awake nights figuring how he can keep decently busy."

"How do you think it's going to work?"

"Oh, it will work all right, because it has to, but they'll all be cussing you," with great good humor. "What's the matter anyhow? Did the old man throw a fit at the size of the payroll?"

"Not exactly, but he came down here with his mind made up to sell the road to the M. and W."

"You don't say so?"

"I talked him out of that, but we must make a showing, for he's good and tired and may dump the whole business any day."

"Well, if he does that there'll be no marrying or giving in marriage for me this summer. It will be just like a Shaker settlement where I am concerned."

Dan laughed. "Oh, you'd be all right, Holt. You'd get something else or the M. and W. would keep you on."

"I don't know about that. A new management generally means a clean sweep all round, and my berth's a pretty good one."

In some manner a rumor of the changes Oakley proposed making did get abroad, and he was promptly made aware that his popularity in Antioch was a thing of the past. He was regarded as an oppressor from whom some elaborate and wanton tyranny might be expected. While General Cornish suffered their inefficiency, his easy going predecessors had been content to draw their salaries and let it go at that, a line of conduct which Antioch held to be entirely proper. This new man, however, was clearly an upstart, cursed with an insane and destructive ambition to earn money for the road. Suppose it did not pay. Cornish could go down into his pocket for the difference, just as he had always done.

What the town did not know and what it would not have believed even if it had been told was that the general had been on the point of selling, a change that would have brought hardship to every one. The majority of the men in the shops owned their own homes, and these homes represented the savings of years. The sudden exodus of two or three hundred families meant of necessity widespread ruin. Those who were forced to go away would have to sacrifice everything they possessed to get away, while those who remained would be scarcely better off. But Antioch never considered such a radical move as even remotely possible. It counted the shops a fixture.

They had always been there, and for this sufficient reason they would always remain.

The days wore on, one very like another, with their spring heat and lethargy. Occasionally Oakley saw Miss Emory on the street to bow to, but not to speak with. While he was grateful for these escapes he found himself thinking of her very often. He fancied—and he was not far wrong—that she was finding Antioch very dull. He wondered, too, if she was seeing much of Ryder. He imagined that she was, and here again he was not far wrong. Now and then he was seized with what he felt to be a weak desire to call, but he always thought better of it in time and was always grateful he had not succumbed to the impulse. But her mere presence in Antioch seemed to make him dissatisfied and resentful of its limitations. Ordinarily he was not critical of his surroundings. Until she came, that he was without companionship and that the town was given over to a deadly inertia which expressed itself in the collapsed ambition of nearly every man and woman he knew had scarcely affected him, beyond giving him a sense of mild wonder.

He had heard nothing of his father, and in the pressure of his work and freshened interest in the fortunes of the Huckleberry had hardly given him a second thought. He felt that since he had sent money to him he was in a measure relieved of all further responsibility. If his father did not wish to come to him, that was his own affair. He had placed no obstacle in his way.

CHAPTER V.

LATE one afternoon, as Oakley sat at his desk in the broad streak of yellow light that the sun sent in through the west windows, he heard a step on the narrow board walk that ran between the building and the tracks. The last shrill shriek of No. 7, as usual, half an hour late, had just died out in the distance, and the informal committee of town loafers which met each train was plodding up Main street to the postoffice in solemn silence.

He glanced around as the door into the yards opened. He saw a tall, gaunt man of sixty-five, a little stoop shouldered and carrying his weight heavily and solidly. His large head was sunk between broad shoulders. It was covered by a wonderful growth of iron gray hair. The face was clean shaven and had the look of a placid mask. There was a curious repose in the man's attitude as he stood with a big hand—the hand of an artisan—resting loosely on the knob of the door.

"Is it you, Dannie?"

Continued on last page.

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