

The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER

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"Of course he did. He didn't want to be hanged!" And there was a good natured roar from the crowd. Already



His captors were three iron-jawed, hard-faced countrymen.

those nearest the prisoner were reaching up to throw off the ropes that bound him. His captors looked on in stupid surprise, but did not seek to interfere.

The prisoner himself, now that he saw he was surrounded by well-wishers and, being in a somewhat surly temper, which was pardonable enough under the circumstances, fell to complaining bitterly and loudly of the treatment he had received. Presently the mob began to disperse, some to slink back into town, rather ashamed of their fury, while the ever lengthening procession which had followed the four men in the buckboard since early in the day faced about and drove off into the night.

An hour afterward the prisoner was airing his grievances in sagacious Mr. Britt's saloon, whither he had been conveyed by the latter gentleman, who had been quick to recognize that, temporarily at least, he possessed great drawing powers. He was only a battered vagabond on his way east from the harvests in the Dakota wheatfields, and he knew that he had looked into the very eyes of death.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN Roger Oakley fled from Antioch on the night of the murder he was resolved that, happen what might, he would not be taken.

For half an hour he traversed back alleys and grass grown "side streets," seeing no one and unobserved, and presently found himself to the north of the town.

Then he sat down to rest and consider the situation.

He was on the smooth, round top of a hillside. At his back were woods and fields, while down in the hollow below him, beyond a middle space that was neither town nor country, he saw the lights of Antioch twinkling among the trees. Dannie was there somewhere, wondering why he did not return. Nearer at hand, across a narrow lane, where the ragweed and Jimson and pokeberry flourished rankly, was the cemetery.

The night was profoundly still, until suddenly the town bell rang the alarm. The old convict's face blanched at the sound, and he came slowly to his feet. The bell rang on. The lights among the trees grew in number, dogs barked, there was the murmur of voices. He clapped his hands to his ears and plunged into the woods.

He had no clear idea of where he was going, but all night long he plodded steadily forward, his one thought to be as far from Antioch as possible by morning. When at last morning came, with its song of half-awakened birds and its level streaks of light piercing the gray dawn, he remembered that he was hungry and that he had eaten nothing since noon the day before. He stopped at the first farmhouse he came to for breakfast, and at his request the farmer's wife put up a lunch for him to carry away.

It was night again when he reached Barrow's Sawmills. He ventured boldly into the one general store and made a number of purchases. The storekeeper was frankly curious to learn what he was doing and where he was going, but the old convict met his questions with surly reserve.

When he left the store he took the one road out of the place, and half a mile farther on forsook the road for the woods.

It was nearly midnight when he went into camp. He built a fire and toasted some thin strips of bacon. He made his supper of these and a few crackers. He realized that he must harbor his slender stock of provisions.

He had told himself over and over that he was not fit to live among men. He would have to dwell alone like a dangerous animal, shunning his fellows. The solitude and the loneliness suited him. He would make a permanent camp somewhere close to the lakes, in the wildest spot he could find, and end his days there.

He carried in his pocket a small railroad map of the state, and in the morning, after a careful study of it, marked out his course. That day, and for several days following, he plodded on and on in a tireless, patient fashion, and with but the briefest stops at noon for his meager lunch. Each morning he was up and on his way with the first glimmer of light, and he kept his even pace until the glow faded from the sky in the west.

Beyond Barrow's Sawmills the pine woods stretched away to the north in one unbroken wilderness. At long intervals he passed loggers' camps and more rarely a farm in the forest, but he avoided these. Instinct told him that the news of Ryder's murder had traveled far and wide. In all that range of country there was no inhabitable spot where he dare show his face.

Now that he had evolved a definite purpose he was quite cheerful and happy save for occasional spells of depression and bitter self-accusation, but the excitement of his flight buoyed him up amazingly.

He had distanced and outwitted pursuit, and his old pride in his physical strength and superiority returned. The woods never ceased to interest him. There was a mighty freedom about them, a freedom he shared and joyed in. He felt he could tramp on forever, with the scent of the pines filling his nostrils and the sweep of the wind in his ears. His muscles seemed of iron. There was cunning and craft, too, in the life he was living.

The days were sultry August days. No rain had fallen in weeks, and the earth was a dead, dry brown. A hot haze quivered under the great trees. Off in the north, against which his face was set, a long, low, black cloud lay on the horizon. Sometimes the wind lifted it higher, and it sifted down dark threads of color against the softer blue of the summer sky. Presently the wind brought the odor of smoke. At first it was almost imperceptible—a suggestion merely—but by and by it was in every breath he drew. The forest was on fire ahead of him. He judged that the tide of devastation was rolling nearer, and he veered to the west. Then one evening he saw what he had not seen before—a dull red light that shone sullenly above the pines. The next day the smoke was thick in the woods. The wind, blowing strongly from the north, floated little wisps and wreaths of it down upon him. It rested like a heavy mist above the cool surface of the lake, on the shores of which he had made his camp the night previous, while some thickly grown depressions he crossed were sour with the stale, rancid odor that clung to his clothes and rendered breathing difficult. There was a powdering of fine white ashes everywhere. At first it resembled a hoar frost and then a scanty fall of snow.

By 5 o'clock he gained the summit of a low ridge. From its top he was able to secure an extended view of the fire. A red line—as red as the reddest sunset—stretched away to the north as far as the eye could see. He was profoundly impressed by the spectacle. The conflagration was on a scale so gigantic that it fairly staggered him. He knew millions of feet of timber must be blazing.

He decided to remain on the ridge and study the course of the fire, so he lay down to rest. Sleep came over him, for the day had been a fatiguing one, but at midnight he awoke. A dull, roaring sound was surging through the forest, and the air was stifling. The fire had burned closer while he slept. It had reached the ridge opposite, which was nearly parallel to the one he was on, and was burning along its northern base. The ridge flattened perceptibly to the west, and already at this point a single lone line of fire had surmounted the blunt crest and was creeping down into the valley which intervened. Presently tongues of fire shot upward. The dark, nearer side of the ridge showed clearly in the fierce light, and soon the fire rolled over its entire length, a long, ruddy cataract of flame. As it gained the summit it seemed to fall forward and catch fresh timber, then it raced down the slope toward the valley, forming a great red avalanche that roared and hissed and crackled and sent up vast clouds of smoke into the night.

Clearly any attempt to go farther north would be but a waste of time and strength. The fire shut him off completely in that quarter. He must retrace his steps until he was well to the south again. Then he could go either to the east or west and perhaps work around into the burned district. The risk he ran of capture did not worry him. Indeed, he scarcely considered it. He felt certain the pursuit, if pursuit there were, had been abandoned days before. He had a shrewd idea that the fire would give people something else to think of. His only fear was that his provisions would be exhausted. When they went he knew

the chances were that he would starve, but he put this fear resolutely aside whenever it obtruded itself. With care his supplies could be made to last many days.

He did not sleep any more that night, but watched the fire eat its way across the valley. When it reached the slope at his feet he shouldered his pack and started south. It was noon when he made his first halt. He rested for two hours and then resumed his march. He was now well beyond the immediate range of the conflagration. There was only an occasional faint odor of smoke in the woods. He had crossed several small streams, and he knew they would be an obstacle in the path of the fire unless the wind, which was from the north, should freshen.

Night fell. He lighted a campfire and scraped together his bed of pine needles and lay down to sleep with the comforting thought that he had put a sufficient distance between himself and the burning forest. He would turn to the west when morning came. He trusted to a long day's journey to carry him out of the menaced territory. It would be easier traveling, too, for the ridges which cut the face of the country ran east and west. The sun was in the boughs of the hemlocks when he awoke. There had been a light rain during the night, and the forest world had taken on new beauty. But it grew hot and oppressive as the hours passed. The smoke thickened once more. At first he tried to believe it was only his fancy. Then the wind shifted into the east and the woods became noticeably clearer. He pushed ahead with renewed hope. This change in the wind was a good sign. If it ever got into the south it would drive the fire back on itself.

He tramped for half the night and threw himself down and slept heavily—the sleep of utter exhaustion and weariness. It was broad day when he opened his eyes. The first sound he heard was the dull roar of the flames. He turned with a hunted, fugitive look toward the west. A bright light shone through the trees. The fire was creeping around and already encircled him on two sides. His feeling was one of bitter disappointment; fear, too, mingled with it. In the south were Ryder's friends—Dannie's enemies and his. Of the east he had a horror which the study of his map did not tend to allay; there were towns there and settlements, thickly scattered. Finally he concluded he would go forward and examine the line of fire. There might be some means by which he could make his way through it.

A journey of two miles brought him to a small water course. The fire was burning along the opposite bank. It blazed among the scrub and underbrush and leaped from tree to tree, first to shrivel their foliage to a dead, dry brown and then envelop them in sheets of flame. The crackling was like the report of musketry.

Roger Oakley was awed by the sight. In spite of the smoke and heat he sat down on the trunk of a fallen pine to rest. Some birds fluttered out of the rolling masses of smoke above his head and flew south with shrill cries of alarm. A deer crossed the stream, not 200 yards from where he sat, at a single bound. Next two large timber wolves entered the water. They landed within a stone's throw of him and trotted leisurely off. The heat soon drove him from his position, and he, too, sought refuge in the south. The wall of flame cut him off from the north and west, and to the east he would not go.

There was something tragic in this blocking of his way. He wondered if it was not the Lord's wish after all that he should be taken. This thought had been troubling him for some time. Then he remembered Dannie—Dannie, to whom he had brought only shame and sorrow. He set his lips with grim determination. Right or wrong, the Lord's vengeance would have to wait. Perhaps he would understand the situation. He prayed that he might.

Twenty-four hours later and he had turned westward with the desperate hope that he could cross out of the path of the fire, but the hope proved futile. There was no help for it. To the east he must go if he would escape.

It was the towns and settlements he feared most, and the people. Perhaps they still continued the search. When he left the wilderness the one precaution he could take would be to travel only by night. This plan when it was firmly fixed in his mind greatly encouraged him. But at the end of ten hours of steady tramping he discovered that the fire surrounded him on three sides. Still he did not despair.

For two days he dodged from east to west, and each day the wall of flame and smoke drew closer about him, and the distances in which he moved became less and less. And now a great fear of Antioch possessed him. The railroad ran nearly due east and west from Buckhorn Junction to Harrison, a distance of ninety-five miles. Beyond the road the country was well settled. There were thriving farms and villages. To pass through such a country without being seen was next to impossible. He felt a measure of his strength fail him, and with it went his courage. It was only the thought of Dannie that kept him on the alert. Happen what might, he would not be taken. It should go hard with the man or men who made the attempt. He told himself this not boastfully, but with quiet conviction. In so far as he could, as the fire crowded him back, he avoided the vicinity of Antioch and inclined toward Buckhorn Junction.

There was need of constant vigilance now, as he was in a sparsely settled section. One night some men passed quite near to the fringe of tamarack swamp where he was camped. Luckily the undergrowth was dense, and his fire had burned to a few red embers. On another occasion, just at dusk, he stumbled into a small clear-

ing and within plain view of the windows of a log cabin. As he leaped back into the woods a man with a cob pipe in his mouth came to the door of the cabin.

Roger Oakley, with the hickory staff which he had cut that day held firmly in his hands and a fierce, wild look on his face, watched him from his cover. Presently the man turned back into the house, closing the door after him.

These experiences startled and alarmed him. He grew gaunt and haggard, a terrible weariness oppressed him, his mind became confused, and a sort of panic seized him. His provisions had failed him, but an occasional cultivated

field furnished corn and potatoes in spite of the serious misgivings he felt concerning the moral aspect of these nightly depredations. When he raided a spring house and carried off eggs and butter and milk he was able to leave money behind. He conducted these transactions with scrupulous honesty.

He had been living in the wilderness three weeks, when at last the fire drove him from cover at Buckhorn Junction. As a town the Junction was largely a fiction. There were a railroad crossing, a freight shed and the depot and perhaps a score of houses scattered along a sandy stretch of country road.

The B. and A. had its connection with the M. and W. at this point. It was also the beginning of a rich agricultural district, and the woods gave place to cultivated fields and farm lands.

It was late afternoon as Roger Oakley approached Buckhorn. When it was dark he would cross the railroad and take his chance there. He judged from the light in the sky that the fire had already burned in between Buckhorn and Antioch. This gave him a certain sense of security. Indeed, the fire surrounded Buckhorn in every quarter except the south. Where there was no timber or brush it crept along the rail fences or ran with tiny spurts of flame through the dry weeds and dead stubble which covered much of the cleared land.

He could see a number of people moving about a quarter of a mile west of the depot. They were tearing down a burning fence that was in perilous proximity to some straw stacks and a barn.

He heard and saw the 6:50 on the M. and W. pull in. This was the Chicago express, and the Huckleberry's local, which was due at Antioch at midnight, connected with it. This connection involved a wait of three hours at Buckhorn. Only one passenger left the train. He disappeared into the depot.

Roger Oakley waited until it was quite dark, and then, leaving the strip of woods just back of the depot, where he had been hiding, stole cautiously down to the track. He had noticed that there were an engine and some freight cars on one of the sidings. He moved among them, keeping well in the shadow. Suddenly he paused. Two men emerged from the depot. They came down the platform in the direc-



Roger Oakley watched him from his cover.

tion of the cars. They were talking earnestly together. One swung himself up into the engine and lighted a torch.

He wondered what they were doing and stole nearer.

They were standing on the platform now, and the man who held the torch had his back to him. His companion was saying something about the wires being down.

He listened intently.

Antioch was in danger, and if Antioch was in danger—Dannie—

All at once the man with the torch turned, and its light suffused his face. It was Dan Oakley.

CHAPTER XX.
DAN OAKLEY went to Chicago, intending to see Holloway and resign, but he found that the Huckleberry's vice president was in New York on business, and no one in his office seemed to know when he would return, so he sat down and wrote a letter telling him of the condition of affairs at Antioch and explaining the utter futility, in view of what had happened, of his trying to cope with the situation.

He waited five days for a reply and, none coming, wired to learn if his letter had been received. This produced results. Holloway wired back that he had the letter under consideration and requested Oakley to remain in Chicago until he returned, but he did not say whether or not his resignation would be accepted. Since there was nothing to be done but await Holloway's pleas-

Continued on page 4

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