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The Dead Line.

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CHAPTER X.

SLICK BLACKBURN "ON HIS MUSCLE."

There was an ancient sage philosopher That had read Alexander Ross over, And swore the world, as he could prove, Was made of fighting and of love. Just so romances are, for what else Is in them all but love and battles.

—H. DIBBEN.

Clarence Diegal entered Cobden the second day after Christmas. It was early in the forenoon and his appearance did not then excite much interest—not so much as it did a few hours later.

Leaving his luggage at the Commercial hotel he called at once on Dr. Carlington, and introducing himself, took a seat in the office and made himself as agreeable as a young man of somewhat shallow nature and intellect and of boundless self-conceit can contrive to be to a mature man of sense. The Doctor offered him a cigar, which he took with well-bred concession, but which he had no doubt was a mere rolled cabbage leaf—people of no financial consequence do smoke such disgustingly cheap cigars; but he was quite astonished at the discovery that it was superior to the high and mighty exclusives he had been accustomed to smoke. An hour after he had finished praising the Doctor's excellent taste as a smoker, the two went into a drug store and at the cigar show-case the Doctor said to the clerk:

"Give us some of the same kind I got this morning; that's the box," pointing to it.

The clerk took out a handful, and as Clarence was lighting his and relishing it, too, he chanced to see the card on the box—

10 Cents. Three for 25 cents.

The cigar almost made him sick and he got rid of the disgusting thing as soon as good breeding would permit.

However, while they were yet smoking in the Doctor's office, and before knowledge of its sickening cheapness had destroyed Clarence's enjoyment of his weed, a conversation occurred with which, and not with smoker's goods, is our present business.

"You have come to arrange that mortgage on the opera house I presume?" said the Doctor interrogatively.

"Well, the company sent me to look after it," said Clarence. "I can't say as to arranging it; that will be for the company to decide after I shall have made my report. The fact is, we (Clarence swelled all up with this "we") have about decided not to extend any mortgages in this locality while these rascally calamity howlers are threatening repudiation. Eastern investors are very timid about Kansas investments just now, and the reputation of this county is particularly bad on account of these socialistic fellows having elected the county officers here last fall. However, the company understands you did all you could personally to stem the tide, and the bankers here speak very favorably of you. Congressman Timberlake, our member from this district, has especially requested the renewal of a few mortgages in this county—yours among others. There are four or five good republican farmers who may be renewed. But not one of these fellows need expect the slightest favor. We shall close them all out in a twinkling. Congressman Timberlake's committee that if we renew for republican farmers and foreclose all other mortgages this policy will have a good effect in driving the wailers back to the republican party, thus averting the danger of legislation adverse to capital. If any renewals are made here in pursuance of such a policy I think your mortgage will be included—if we find everything all right. Besides, you have a power-

ful ally in a very dear friend of mine who speaks so highly of you and your family as old friends of hers that I shall go to the very verge of my instructions in order to oblige her."

"Her?" said the Doctor smiling. "Pray, what lady friend has been taking such an interest in me and my affairs?"

"Miss Cotterell," said Clarence. "I met her at Haverhill college. She spent part of the summer at our house with my sister, and we became quite good friends. When I told her the other day that I was coming here on business she urged me to become acquainted with you and Mrs. Carlington as the best people in the town."

"Oh, yes," said the Doctor. "I remember Kate. She is a bright girl, and I hope she will make her way in the world. She was with us over six months, and I always thought she was out of place; that she was born for better things."

"Out of place? Born for better things?" repeated Clarence in puzzled surprise. "Out of place in your house? Why, she told me the other day that she was only a farmer's daughter." And he brightened at the suspicion that she had said that only to try him, and he was glad now he had not appeared to be frightened by the revelation.

"So she is," said the Doctor. "But she is brighter and better, and a deuced sight prettier and better bred, than the young women who looked down upon her when she worked for us."

"Worked for you? You don't mean that Miss Cotterell ever—"

"Yes," said the Doctor, "she was working at our house as a domestic when her good fortune befell her; and right glad I was at her good luck."

Clarence was astounded. Still, perhaps, there might be a redeeming feature in her case so presently he rallied sufficiently to inquire:

"You spoke of her good luck; did she inherit a fortune?"

"No, not that," said the Doctor. "At least not yet, although stranger things have happened than that the old man should make her his heir. An old gentleman of quite distinguished appearance—a stranger in the city—had the misfortune to get hurt in a runaway accident while Kate was here. He was carried into my house and lay here some weeks, during which time Kate was his nurse. He became very much attached to her, and when he recovered he took her out to her home one day. We haven't seen her since. We received a note from her saying that she was going to attend college, and the next thing we heard was that she had gone to Haverhill. It was generally understood that the old gentleman had sent her to be educated."

"Is he going to marry her?" asked Clarence with some indignation.

"No, I hardly think that," said the Doctor. "Kate is only a mere child yet, and he must be at least 50 and looks old even for one of that age. I don't think her father would have approved of any such thing as that for Kate is his only daughter and he is very proud of her. Besides her brother was at home when Overton and Kate were there and when the arrangement, whatever it was, was made, and John would have wiped up the earth with Overton had he proposed such a thing as marrying Kate. John is only a blacksmith in the railway shops at Graham, but he is as proud as Lucifer, and a very extraordinary kind of man with notions away above his station in life. He and Overton seemed to have become regular chums, and I think it is safe to bet, from that circumstance alone, that Kate's education has no matrimonial string to it."

This was gall and worm-wood to Clarence. She herself a servant, her brother a common shop hand, and her

education a matter of charity! He finally inquired:

"Is her father so poor she had to work out as a servant?"

"He is very poor like a good many farmers about here," said the Doctor. "He was prosperous in a way till so many farmers began going down hill three or four years ago, but he is pretty well used up now. Your company is foreclosing a mortgage on his homestead, and everything on his place is under a chattel mortgage to a broker here. He will soon have nothing at all. He is one of your calamity howlers."

"Is he one of the new party cranks?"

"Quite a prominent member of the party. He is now chairman of their county central committee, and he stands high with the Farmer's Alliance of this county."

This was the last straw the camel's back could bear.

"That settles it," muttered Clarence. Presently he inquired:

"Where is this strange old man whose protegee Miss Cotterell is?"

"I don't know. He left here almost immediately after his visit to Kate's family, and I have heard nothing of him since."

Both were silent a moment; then the Doctor said abruptly:

"By the way, Mr. Diegal, you are a young man still at college, and I presume somewhat given to investigation of what other people condemn—that is the college young man's way. Have you ever looked into the doctrines of this new party?"

"No!" said Clarence contemptuously. "Why should I load up such trash? It is not in my line. Have you?"

The Doctor hesitated, but presently answered:

"I wouldn't say this to anyone but a reliable republican and man of business, but to tell the truth one day last fall there was a joint debate here between one of the People's party speakers and one of the ablest republican orators in the state. I attended, and confess the new party speaker opened my eyes considerably to some things. I was not prepared to hear such a remarkably able speech from one of that kind of folks, and the assertions he made, and actually proved, too, astonished me. What was worse, it was humiliatingly clear that our man simply could not answer him. The points and proofs were clearly as much of a surprise to our speaker as they were to me. I got interested in political questions for the first time in a good many years, and I came home here determined that I would study the subject and answer the People's party man's arguments myself. I went at it scientifically. I first got hold of the so-called literature these people had been sending everywhere by the ton and made myself master of all they had to say. Then I got hold of everything I could lay my hands on which our party had said in answer. I worked hard, but deuce take me if I could find a single argument or fact in answer to the positions of our adversaries. I found ridicule and invective enough, even plenty of abuse that did not rise to the dignity of either ridicule or invective, but I found absolutely no argument, no fact. Not one. That is humiliating, isn't it? There is a field for some of you young men of ability. Why don't you get up a good strong answer to these Alliance and People's party demands? It would make you famous and give you a great political boost."

"We shall give them a good strong answer," said Clarence with vehemence. "We are giving it to them now. Eastern capital is leaving the state as fast as it can get out and boycotting the scoundrels. We shall answer them by foreclosing their mortgages and taking their farms from them. They can understand that, and it is the only argument they can understand, and all they will get, so far as I am concerned. I am astonished, Dr. Carlington, that such a man as you should defend these anarchistic vagaries. Suppose they should be unanswerable, what is that to you or to any business or professional man? Let the farmers do their own fighting. Such men as you can't afford to load up their follies. This will all blow over if it gets no encouragement from men of standing, and these fool farmers will go to work again instead of whittling boxes and talking learnedly of finance. You should not give them the slightest countenance. They will ruin you and

every other man of property if they are ever allowed to get full control of the state government. If they are left to themselves eastern capital and the banks will starve them out and bring them to their senses by shutting down on them and refusing to lend them a dollar. That will settle them, and in short order, too."

"I did not say, Mr. Diegal, that I accepted the new party's doctrines. I would not even have said what I have said to anyone about here, nor to anyone but a business man and republican," said the Doctor, who began to be afraid he had gone too far to get his own mortgage renewed; for what if Clarence should report him as one of the worthy to be foreclosed? "I would not," he continued, "have you repeat what I have said for the world. I appreciate the importance of downing these folks as fully as you do. They have well nigh ruined some of us here, already. That is precisely why I wish some of our able men would prepare some powerful answer to their talk. Our remissness in this respect is doing incalculable harm; for every day their speakers and newspapers are boasting that we can't answer them, and these boasts are making them converts. We ought to do something."

"Well, we are doing something," said Clarence, petulantly. "They are being sold out by the sheriff as fast as we can get to them, and not a loan agent nor a bank will let them have a dollar. The merchants are shutting down on them, too, so they can get no credit. What can the fools do when we shall have taken all they have and they have nothing to go on?"

"They can vote against you, and ruin you in turn," said the Doctor with emphasis.

"Pshaw!" said Clarence. "Get them down to where they have nothing, and we can buy all their votes. Besides, there are the railroad employes, and the hands of other large employers, the mine operators for instance; we can always vote them as we please by letting them know their bread and butter is at stake. Then, again, these fellows when they lose their homes will, most of them, drift to Oklahoma or elsewhere in search of new lands, and will leave the state to the republicans and democrats, who will be with the business interests, no matter which wins. Even if these fools should elect their candidates, we can persuade them to put up 'conservative candidates'—men who don't believe in their nonsense but say so to get office; and we can always count on these 'conservative' fellows to be with us if any attempt is made to actually do anything serious. I don't see anything in this crank movement to be afraid of."

"If that is so—if there is no reason to fear this movement—why are eastern capitalists and our home banks losing their chances to make profitable loans and get good interest in order to freeze out the movement?" asked the Doctor, with the suspicion of a twinkle in his good-natured eye.

"You know there are fools among business men, too, Doctor; and a lot of them have allowed themselves to be frightened by the empty noise these Alliance fellows are making," said Clarence with a sneer. "But we had better get to business, Doctor. Let us go see your opera house."

And they went out, stopping at the drugstore as already stated. Clarence was out of sorts at what he had heard about Kate. Still, he resolved to go to her father's farm and see the whole disgusting truth for himself. He did not know Sam Cotterell or no such dangerous excursion would have been thought of, but it so happened that Sam Cotterell was denied the pleasure of thrashing the son of the loan company's arrogant president. That afternoon the Doctor called Slick Blackburn and said:

"Here, Slick! This gentleman wishes to go out to Sam Cotterell's farm. Get the buggy and drive him out. Do you know the road?"

"No, sah; I don't 'xactly know it, but I can fin' it. Miss Kate done tol' me whar dey live."

"Do you mean to say that Miss Cotterell ever talked with you with such familiarity?" asked Clarence, with a look of disgust.

"Yes, sah; I does. An' bettah men dan you has talked fambilyery with me sah. I'd hab you un'erstan' dat Slick Blackburn am a 'portant pusson in de politics of dis heah c'munity, an