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THE NEW CLARION

By... WILL N. HARBEN

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CHAPTER XXIII. Mother and Daughter.

ONE thing that astonished me a little, Abe," she went on, "was that when Mr. Daniel just now said he thought Howard did the shooting you disputed it with 'im—said he didn't do it." "I didn't say it—I didn't say no such thing!" Abe put his hands on either side of his plate and stared at her fiercely. "That you go with yore fool notions. You couldn't hear what I said. I—just said—said I thought the boy—I didn't say he didn't do it. Folks all about say he done it. Lawyers all judges an' witnesses say he's the one, an' they know better 'n me. You'll go tattlin' with yore long tongue till—till—well, you let the thing alone, that's what you do! Let the law take its course. He was ready to kill 'im. He armed hisse' fer that purpose. He had no use fer 'im. Howard knowed 'im, like a lot o' other folks knowed 'im, fer the devil that he was with helpless, innocent young gals."

"That reminds me, Abe," Mrs. Fulton said, curiously. "I'm not dead sure, but I thought I heard you mention poor Susy's name to Mr. Daniel. I was sort o' surprised to hear you do it, too, fer she was akin to you, an' most folks don't like to talk about such delicate matters in their own blood. I've knowed all along how sorry you was fer Susy; but I never brought it up. Pore, pore gal!"

"Yes, I told Mr. Daniel about that," Abe faltered, after an awkward pause. "He hadn't heard of that particular case, though he knowed all about several others."

"You are powerful tetchy, Abe, darlin'," the woman went on gently. "I'd talk plain to you, but you think a woman don't know enough to give advice to a man. A woman ain't such a plumb fool. Sometimes she feels a thing to be risky an' unwise that a man passes over as of no consequence."

"What are you drivin' at?" Abe demanded, seriously. "Oh, well, I don't believe in talkin' too free to a man as good even as Abner Daniel is supposed to be," was the half shrinking answer. "Risks is risks." "Risks? What sort o' risks? Are you plumb crazy, woman?"

"I knowed you'd fly off the handle," she said appealingly. "But I believe a woman has as much right to use her brain as a man has, an' I've been thinkin' about Mr. Daniel's long drawn-out palaver."

"Long palaver?" "Yes," she went on, more freely. "For his look and tone were more inviting because more fraught with fear than anger. 'He's the keenest man in this state by long odds, Abe. Folks say that he makes the best boss an' cattle trader of anybody about here. Now, my point is this, Abe darlin': you wouldn't want poor Susy's name fetched up in public now that the pore thing is lyin' in a peaceful grave fur from home. You wouldn't like to hear it on everybody's tongue linked with that human scab that has got his just desserts, would you?"

"No, but what makes you think—?" "Why, I've got common sense, an' kin see a 'neb before my nose, that's all," she interrupted. "Abner Daniel is dependin' on Howard to help 'im out with the paper he bought. It is losin' money as it stands. You heard 'im say so. Well, don't you know that he ain't goin' to leave a stone unturned to get Howard free? An' don't you see whar you come in? He kin have you summoned to court an' put on the stand to tell all you know agin Craig's character. Don't you see how that would stir up sympathy an' justify Howard in killin' a man o' such a stripe?"

Abe stared speechlessly. He stroked his lips and chin with his big rough hand and avoided her gaze. "Ah, I see you understand!" his wife cried, exultantly. "You men think us women hain't a grain o' sense, but we ain't all fools. Ef Abner Daniel had been talkin' to me about Howard I never would have let on about Susy—you bet I wouldn't. When a life's at stake folks will do anything that's dirty an' low to save it, an' you better watch Abner Daniel. Why, as little as you may think of it, Howard an' 'im would shoulder the thing onto you ef they had half a chance. It is hard-er to convict a prominent man than a pore friendless feller like you, Abe."

"You don't believe they would try it—a thing like that, do you?" he cried. "What wouldn't they try ef it offered Howard a chance of escape from the scaffold? They'd even pay money to get folks to testify agin somebody else that they could throw the blame on. Let 'im alone in the future, Abe. Daniel belongs to one set o' folks an' you an' me to another. We mustn't give 'im a chance to fetch that pore gal's name into it ef we kin help it. What was it he was axin' you so close about—I mean when he axed so particular about the last time you seed Craig alive?"

"I don't know, I don't remember," Fulton started suddenly.

"It seemed to me, Abe, as well as I could hear, that he got you tangled up a little. First you said the last time you laid eyes on Craig was here at the pligpen, an' next you said it was at the fence you was buildin'. I knowed you was wrong about the pligpen statement, fer of Craig had rid by here I would have seed 'im. Besides, he wouldn't ride so fur out o' his way unless he had some'n powerful important to say. You see, Abe, darlin', right that you'd be in danger, fer you are sort o' wishy-washy an' careless in yore statements. Ef Daniel does summon you to testify about Susy an' Craig you'll have to be powerful careful, fer a sharp lawyer will do his level best to mix you up, an' when a body is under oath on the stand they have to know what they are talkin' about. You remember how helpless you was when you was convicted that time?"

Fulton rose clumsily to his feet. He stepped down outside and moved across the grass to the wash bench. Wondering over his unexpected silence, his wife followed, utttering softly to his side. The red light of the burning pine sticks in the chimney behind streamed



"It's that! That! Oh, he's comin' to me!"

out on the black forest in front of them. She put her hand on his arm and held it, but he said nothing. Suddenly he started, uttered a gasp and cried:

"Look! What's that comin' this way? It's a man on a horse! Great God—it's—"

"Tain't nothin'," the woman said as soothingly as if he were a child frightened by dreams. "It's jest yore fancy. I've been talkin' too much about—"

"It's that! That! Oh, he's comin' to me! God have mercy! Drive 'im off!"

"Don't be silly, Abe, sweetheart. The woman put her arms around his neck. "It ain't nothin' but yore fancy. I've seed sights out o' the common myse't, but that ain't nothin'. We've been talkin' so much about killin' an' hangin' an' the like that you are plumb upset. Set down on the bench. It's cool here. I'll put up the things an' come back."

Obedient her as a child might, he sat down. She left him and went in to her work. She held a cup in fixed hands, stared into the fire and cried:

"Oh, my Lord! Lord have mercy! I understand it now. Pore, pore Abe! Lord 'n' mercy—have mercy!"

Cora Langham greeted her mother affectionately on the return of the latter from a two day visit to Atlanta.

"How did you find the house?" Cora asked indifferently.

"Oh, all right, but the grass has suffered in the front yard. It looks dry and parched. I found out one particular thing that set my mind at rest."

"What was that, mother?"

"You know, I guess," Mrs. Langham replied. "Why, I found that we have not been connected in the slightest with that Howard Tinsley affair. Even your father did not mention it. I determined to see if people were talking, and found that not one word had been said. You know, if there was any gossip Cousin Tilly would have heard it and brought it straight to me; but I chatted with her fully an hour, and she didn't mention it. I let it worry me entirely too much. Very few happened to see the notice of Howard's visit to us. Is there any fresh news about him?"

"Nothing particular," Cora answered. "Then he hasn't owned up yet?"

"No, and from what some of his best friends say he never will. Mother, you remember Mary Trumbley?"

"Yes, of course. What about her?"

"They say she is a most remarkable girl." Cora's eyes were now stealthily probing her mother's face. "Frank Raymond was telling me about her. He can't talk of anything else. You know she went to work on Howard's paper, didn't you?"

"I think I heard you say something about it. But what of that?"

"The papers all around, even the big dailies, are saying her work is wonderful—simply wonderful. People here in town, too, and all through the country are admiring it. I've just been reading one of her editorials. I can tell which are hers. They really are good. The style is smooth, direct and beautiful. They are full of high ideals. Some are like essays of the best class. She—mother, she has stuck to Howard from the first day of—of his great trouble. Frank Raymond says that there has not been a single issue of the paper which has not contained a strong article from her about—about the inhumanity of accusing a person falsely. He says—Frank says—that her articles

are beginning to have a wonderful effect on public opinion. People are not so sure now that Howard has not told the truth all along. His friends—his true girl friends—are sending him flowers and notes of encouragement, and even strangers are writing him kind hopeful letters."

"Well, that's all right," Mrs. Langham said coldly. "Even if he is found guilty at his trial it will be a comfort to Mary to know that she did so much for him."

"But he may not be found guilty. In fact, many now don't believe he will. They say that no guilty man could stand up as Howard is doing under such a charge and put such a brave face on the matter. They are reading what he writes and saying that his articles don't sound as if they came from a guilty person. It is all due to—"

Mary Trumbley. She brought it about. Mother, most persons think money is an advantage in life. I begin to think it is a serious drawback. If Mary Trumbley had been a rich society girl an opportunity of this sort could not have come to her. I'd rather live on a farm at the foot of a mountain, as she does, and be able to do what she is doing than to marry a millionaire and live in a mansion in New York or London."

"Oh, bosh!" Mrs. Langham sniffed. "Of course it is good for her to have such a talent, for that's all the poor girl has, and she deserves something to vary the monotony of her hard life. If I didn't think you had more sense than to do so I'd be afraid you were actually interested in Howard Tinsley."

"Why, mother?" Cora's glance sank and her lips twitched. "Don't you know he is in love with Mary Trumbley?" she faltered. "He couldn't help it after—all that has taken place recently. As for me, he hates me—that's what he does; he hates me. I've never sent him a single word of encouragement. I was afraid, you see, to stand by him. I suppose I am still. I am a coward. He'd been a friend to me, but I deserted him the moment he got into trouble. You influenced me to do it. I had no will of my own—I haven't yet, as for that matter."

"I am unworthy. I wouldn't have turned against Howard Tinsley as I did if I had been worthy. I'll never be worthy till I can stand a test such as Mary Trumbley has stood, and such a chance may never come to me now."

Cora suddenly covered her face with her hands.

"Cora, dear, you alarm me—you really do," said Mrs. Langham. "You upset me frightfully," the mother slowly said. "I see it all. It is this trouble of Howard Tinsley's. You ought never to have met such a man as he. You are allowing your conscience to bother you in a silly, fanciful way. When you entertained him at our house that day you showed by your desire not to admit other callers that you wanted him to yourself. You had never acted so with any other man. You were excited unduly. You wanted to make a good impression. I don't know what passed between you. I might have listened, but I was unable to do so without your knowing it, and—"

"I'll tell you," Cora uncovered her face and with piteous eyes stared straight at her mother. "That very sight separated me and him forever. He saw the sort of life I cling to, and if—he had ever thought of marrying me he gave it up then. I saw it in his face—in his strong, manly face. I read his contempt for every bit of gaudy display we made that day."

"He had been holding off; I thought he was leading to Mary Trumbley, and I resorted to that contemptible snifter-urge. I thought—oh, I thought that perhaps when he saw me—well, as I live at home—he would—would be influenced as other men have been and—"

and declare himself."

"You are idealizing a very ordinary person," the mother declared. "If he had killed that man impulsively or in anger he might deserve some little consideration, but the fact that he is deliberately trying to save his neck—"

"Don't, mother, don't!" Cora broke in. "I atk to it. I know what I am talking about. Down home yesterday I heard that Hamilton Quibby of this place, who stands at the top of his profession as a criminal lawyer, was at the Kimball House. Well, I confided in him—to some extent. I did not compromise my—"

I simply hinted at Howard's attentions to you and told him that I was not much to be thought of about the case. I reckon Howard is as nice as the general run o' boys, but everybody knows he has a hot temper an' armed hisse' 'n' ven lookin' fer his man."

"Yes, he's a hot temper," Abner was speaking at random in an effort to get his bearings. Never before had he felt his ingenuity put to such a bewildering test, and his hope of rescuing Howard was becoming less and less as he realized the safe ground Fulton now stood upon. Was it possible that the

wits of a man of this low type could defeat his own?

"I'm goin' to quit drinkin', even fer my health," Abe went on, the glare of a half insane man in his eyes. "You must 'a' thought I was a plumb idiot that night, an' I must 'a' been actually full o' liquor."

"I didn't smell it on you, Abe. I was bothered about my hoss an' the hard work me an' Mary have on our hands in the office. You can have no idea how awful it is to be in such a tight place as me'n her are in."

"I remember a little bit o' what I said—jest sort o' like a dream, you know, Mr. Daniel. I think maybe I talked about—about my cousin Susy Thomas an' her trouble. Bein' out o' my head that way an' 'n'ar bein' so much talk about—about Craig's bad reputation with women, I reckon I got the pore gal mixed up with him some way in my silly mind. She had made trouble like that, but a young feller I knowed about that used to run as brakeman on the W. and A. road was the one that was to blame. He deserted her all right enough, an' run away somewhere. I—I must give the devil his due, an' Craig, with all that is said agin 'im, ortn't to be blamed with—"

with another feller's deeds."

"I see, I see," Abner said, helplessly. "But she did—you said, I believe, that you got word back from Texas that the pore gal died out thar."

There was just a hint of hesitation, such as a witness on the stand in court might show in the desire to make an accurate statement, then:

CHAPTER XXIV. Pleading For a Life.

A FEW evenings later Abner Daniel was walking after supper on the grass in front of Trumbley's house. It was his usual early bedtime, but he had no inclination to sleep. Mary had been his companion for more than an hour, and they had been talking of their work and above all of Howard's trouble, but she had gone into the house, and he was facing the grim problem alone. Suddenly at the bend of the road he saw the blurred figure of a man come into view, pause for a moment and then move toward him with what seemed to be an uncertain, hesitating step. Then, looking more closely, Abner recognized Abe Fulton. Seized by a sud-

den desperate impulse toward fresh activity, Abner stepped to the gate and, opening it, advanced boldly toward Fulton.

"With a low grunt of fear and surprise the latter turned and was about to flee the spot when Abner uttered a soft, reassuring laugh. "Huh! I scared you," he chuckled. "I didn't mean to, Abe. I dropped my tobacco at the foot o' that oak an' was down on my all fours roottin' about in the grass like a hog tryin' to find it. Which way are you headed at this time o' night? Late fer you to be out, ain't it?"

"I wasn't goin' nowh'ar," Abe replied hesitatingly.

"At the blacksmith's shop in the edge o' town this mornin' the feller that was blowin' the bellows, Abe, said you'd jest passed along an' axed ef he'd seed me. Was it anything particular you wanted?"

Fulton blinked helplessly.

"No, I—I didn't want nothin'," he said haltingly. "Nothin' at all. I was jest wonderin' ef you'd passed along."

"I—The voice died away."

Abe looked toward the full moon and stood stroking the bristling, week old beard on his chin.

"Oh, I'll bet you did want to see me," Abner said. "You are jest a little back'd an' slow to come to a thing, Abe. I used to be that way myself till politics, tradin' hosses, an' one thing or other learnt me that it wouldn't do."

The man offered no denial, and of this Abner made a mental note.

"I did want to see you," he blurted out. "I hain't been right in my mind here lately. Sometimes I don't know what I'm sayin' or doin'. My wife has noticed it an' called my attention to it several times."

"Ah, he is goin' to own up an' claim mental unsoundness," Abner reflected, while a sudden glow of hope suffused him. "He's sharp enough to know that it will strengthen his claim." Then aloud to Fulton, he said: "A man ain't accountable fer what he does when he's that way, Abe, especially ef he's all keyed up in pity over somebody bein' harmed or wronged—some helpless person that he hated to see suffer."

Fulton seemed so much absorbed over what he was now bent on saying that Abner's words fell on closed ears. "I was havin' one o' my worst spells 'tween evenin' when you was out lookin' fer yore hoss. I'd been feelin' so bad that I drunk a lot o' whisky just 'fore you come. I thought that would clear up my mind, but I tuck too much. I drunk mighty nigh a pint, all told. I was jest gittin' under the influence of it when I was talkin' to you, an' after you left I was plumb soaked. My wife overheard the ramblin' way I was talkin' to you, an' when I come in—or it was the next mornin', when my mind was clear—she told me—she told me she had never heard anybody say such ridiculous things in 'er life."

"Ridiculous?" Abner's heart sank in sheer dismay over the unexpected stand the man was taking. "Ridiculous? Did you say ridiculous, Abe?"

"Yes, an' I've been tryin' to remember what it was I did say that night. I think, among other things, we talked about—"

"Yes, we talked about Craig an' Howard Tinsley," Abner went on fiercely, for the course Fulton was taking had upset one of his best hopes. "You said you was sorry fer the boy—you said he'd done you favors, an' you seemed to think, though I didn't fully agree with you at the time, that Howard was tellin' the truth."

"I may have said it," Abe went on insistently, keeping his desperate gaze on a wheel cut rut in the road, which he was nervously kicking with the toe of his coarse shoe. "I don't git full often, but when I do I slobber over an' sometimes cry about the least thing. My wife said I cried about Howard when I got to bed after you left that night an' she was bein' treated worse'n a dog. That was odd, too, fer I don't know a thing about the case. I reckon Howard is as nice as the general run o' boys, but everybody knows he has a hot temper an' armed hisse' 'n' ven lookin' fer his man."

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There was just a hint of hesitation, such as a witness on the stand in court might show in the desire to make an accurate statement, then:

"Yes; she died—she did die out thar, Mr. Daniel, but it was from weak lungs—consumption. It was in her family. She was always puny-like."

"Then the operation you mentioned?" Abner suggested. "She didn't die from that?"

Again Fulton deliberated before speaking. Finally in response to Abner's steady stare he said: "I don't know that thar was any operation, but some folks that was in a position to know said that the young feller did give Susy some concoction or other that wasn't good fer her an' maybe have hurried the pore gal to 'er grave. I don't know, I know, though, that 'im goin' to let whisky alone hereafter, Mr. Daniel. It won't do when it plumb upsets a man like I was that night. I sents a man like I was that night. For instance, you know, I couldn't recall exactly when it was that I last seed Craig 'fore he was shot. I made two different statements, one on the heels o' t'other. I said once that I was at the new wire fence at Craig's an' then at my pligpen at home, but now that I'm plumb sober an' got all my senses I remember that it was at my pligpen that I last seed 'im."

"I see, I see," Abner said gently. "An' I reckon it was to straighten out all this that you was inquiren' about me at the blacksmith's shop, Abe?"

"Yes, I thought I'd git it straight ef I run across you an' had a talk."

"An' that's what you was lookin' fer me tonight fer?" Abner led him on gently.

"Yes," Abe nodded. "I wanted you to have a plumb straight tale. I didn't see no use o' lettin' you believe what wasn't so."

Abner made no reply. Glancing a few yards ahead, he saw his wagon under a spreading beech at the roadside, and for some reason which he failed to make known he moved toward it. It was as if he had forgotten the presence of his companion. With a slow look of uneasy wonder Fulton followed.

"Yes, lots an' lots o' things p'int to Howard," Abe went on, almost in a tone of appeal. "I can't blame 'im, though, Mr. Daniel, fer Craig cussed 'im to his face several times, an' Howard ain't ways no high strung an' easy to git mad."

They reached the wagon, and Abner put his hand on the detachable spring seat. "Git roond t'other side, Abe, an' he'll be down with it. I'm goin' to have a feller haul some stove wood from this mountain tomorrow, an' I don't want 'im to take this seat along. It fills up too much, considerin' that he's to be paid by the load."

Abe obeyed. He went around to the other side, and he and Abner lifted the seat over the wagon pole and put it against the trunk of the beech. "Let's set down awhile, Abe, I'm sorter tired," Abner said, with a little yawn, sinking upon the seat and crossing his slim legs. "Set down—set down, Abe."

Like an automaton Fulton complied, starting at the ground. Abner saw his knees trembling under their ragged coverings. The sight of the cowed desperate creature touched his heart, and a tone of real sympathy, that was not without effect on its object, filled his voice when he next spoke.

"This is a sad, sad old world, Abe," he began. "I've been in it a long time, an' I hain't seed much else but trouble on every hand. I wish I could be a good man, but I can't always manage it. I'll feel better tonight, though, ef I make a clean breast to you about some'n I done. You may think it is a small matter, but it ain't to me. I actually lied to you t'other night. I intimidated I thought Howard was guilty. In tryin' to do a little good—in tryin' to find some way to help that pore stricken boy an' his heartbroken mammy, I dropped into my old tricky way o' talkin' that I acquired when I was younger an' traded a lot with keen fellers that had no conscience an' killed what little I had. The truth is, Abe, that I was so anxious to find out ef you could throw any light on the matter t'other night that I lied out by accusin' Howard myse'f. I saw you was friendly to 'im, an' I knowed that 'd set you to talkin', an' it did—you know it did."

Fulton laid his sprawling hands on his knees to steady them, but he kept his eyes averted. "I didn't know you was follerin' me then, Mr. Daniel; but I did after I thought it over," he said, huskily.

"Then I seed yore hand, an' got ready fer you. Ef you want the truth you may have it hot from my box, Mr. Daniel. I seed what you thought, but you hain't got a smidgen o' proof—not a smidgen agin me. An' ef I am tryin' to defend myse' now it is because I've got to. I know what you think, an' that's enough fer me. I know you are one o' the keenest men in the country, but I ain't goin' to let you bully me. Ef—you had any proof you would throw the whole blame on me an' clear yore man, but you hain't got no proof—the proof all lies some'n's else."

"You are right, I hain't got no proof, Abe," Daniel returned sadly.

Daniel paused a moment.

"Well, Abe," he continued, "I'm here to say that I am convinced that folks can't keep on doin' wrong, even ef they try. The yore laws of the universe are agin it. Every day you pick up a paper an' read how some feller has toted crime on his soul fer years an' years an' finally come forward of his own free will an' dumped it off in open confession. Abe, yore ma is dead—passed on—hain't she?"

"Yes," slowly drawled Fulton. "She died when I was a boy."

"She was a good woman, I'll be bound, Abe. Wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whar I think she is, Abe? She's some'n's whar God's light is brighter 'n' it is here. Who knows, she may be able to come nigh you an' throw her holy influence about you? Beh! more like God than she was here."

"Yes."