

The LASH of CIRCUMSTANCE

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SYNOPSIS.

Abner Halliday, a miserly millionaire, is found straggled, bound and insensible in his room. His safe riddled and \$40,000 missing. The thread of the story is taken up by his nephew Tom. Living in the same house are other relatives: reckless Bruce Halliday and pretty Clare Winton.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

I happened to meet Bruce one day at our noon luncheon. It was Saturday afternoon and my work was finished for the week. He came into the place where I sat and dropped heavily into a seat beside me. His appearance caused me to whirl upon him. His face was drawn tense as the skin of a drum, his eyes were heavy as though with a great weariness, and his hands aspen in their shakiness. He had the haunted look of a man who has been crushed, soul and body, by some appalling disaster. Marveling at the evil transformation which had come over him, I let my hand fall upon his shaking fingers.

"What is it, Bruce?" I cried sharply. He blotted the perspiration from his face and answered me hoarse as a crow.

"It is all up. They have wiped me out clean as a whistle. Had everything I could rake and scrape on 'System' stock, and she has gone straight to the bottommost pit of inferno. And I was forty thousand to the good and was going to quit forever at fifty thousand and marry Clare." He burst into tears. "And now I can't marry her, for I am ruined, busted, blown up, shot to pieces. If any one should give me an automobile I couldn't raise the wind to fill its tires. His head dropped forward, and wiping his eyes dry he sat with chest heaving. I stared at him.

"How much did it sink?" I asked slowly after a moment. He waved his hands helplessly.

"It didn't sink; it didn't take time to do that. It just plunged, dived, sounded—dropped like a ton of lead in a vacuum. I was wiped out before I could yell 'keno' and crook a finger. Oh, the miserable shame of it! As unspeakable! Fool unmentionable! Idiot unutterable! Ass! Idiot! Fool!"

Shocked but helpless I surveyed him in silence. Presently his voice arose again, this time angrily.

"But that stock is only temporarily knocked down, and is bound to come up smiling long before the count. It was that damnable published lie that started the panic, and the scare will be over in 24 hours when the truth is known. If I only had \$10,000 more I could get back in good shape in no time. But I can't beg, borrow or steal one-tenth of that sum. I'm an alley-infesting, free-lunch pauper who can't even sell his soul because Old Nick figures he'll get it anyway free gratis. And there's our dear Uncle Abner sitting up there in his den this very minute plowing his fingers and nose through \$40,000 that he has just collected in currency. I was up to see him in a dying effort to get him to stake me, but he only grinned at me like a totem pole and kept on counting the baubles of yellow backs until I wanted to yell and had to run away to get shut of it." He got upon his feet and in his anger banged the table with a metal object which he had tightly clenched in his fist.

"But I've simply got to get ten thousand for a month or two, I tell you, and I'm going to do it." Then suddenly subsiding he turned to me in helpless impotency. "You couldn't spare me anything in the shape of an advance, could you, old man?"

The pathos of the appeal touched me, but I shook my head. "No, Bruce. I can give you nothing to speculate with," I replied quietly. He got up with a despairing shrug of his shoulders, nodded a hurried goodby and was off on what was doubtless some last despairing quest. I saw no good in attempting to detain him and therefore made no effort to call him back.

Thoughts of what he had told me filled my mind to the exclusion of all else. It was bad news, very bad news. Indeed, and I knew that Clare would know she did, she would take his troubles deep into her own heart. And it was a miserable shame, too. Forty thousand dollars was a magnificent start along the road to fortune for a man only twenty-eight years old, and it would probably be many years before he could climb that high again. The suddenness of the catastrophe was a distinct shock to me. For an hour I pondered over it deeply, then, arising, took my own departure homeward.

Uncle Abner was still nosing around among his stacks of currency as I entered. He glanced up at me quickly as I opened the door, then, ignoring me, picked up a thousand dollar bill and began talking to it.

"Look at me, you beauty. Of course you don't know how I got you, but I'm going to tell you. I schemed for you days and laid awake for you nights. I sweat for you and I set traps for you and denied myself for you, and finally I got you. You led me a pretty chase, but in the end I captured you because I had my soul set upon you. And why did I want you? Because you are the concentration of stored energy. All I have to do is turn you loose in the world and sit back in my chair and watch. In

a minute a hundred men will jump forth and hammer and saw and toil from morning until night. And the results of all their labor will be mine because while they work for you, you belong to me. I could buy men, women or souls with you—but I won't. I am just going to breed you. I am going to breed you until you get me another like yourself, and then I am going to do it all over again. And you will never get away from me on this earth, either." He turned to me with that disgusting leer of his.

"Tom, how many of these beauties have you saved up?"

"Not any. And it doesn't look as though I ever would at the price I pay you for second-class board and lodgings." He leaped to his feet in a quivering rage, for the moment made speechless by my unprecedented insolence in daring to resent his insults. But his voice came to him soon enough. Grimacing like a chimpanzee he fairly squealed in his anger.

"Second-class lodgings! You never had enough money in your life to buy a quarter of it. And you never will have, either, you spendthrift. If I didn't charge you for your living you would have just that much more to go to the dogs with. You ought to thank me for it. Second-class board! You will be glad to get a bone to gnaw yet, you puppy." Suddenly he subsided to a sneer and began smoothing my coat over like a prospective buyer of old clothes.

"This suit, how much did it cost you, huh?"

"Fifty dollars."

"And the rest of that trousseau that you wear around in the mud, including the overcoat?"

"I don't know. I never figured it up. Probably seventy-five more."

He sat down with a thump and sat glaring at me as his voice gradually rose again.

"A hundred and twenty-five dollars' worth of dry goods on your back as you strut around the streets! And on your salary!" He popped up like a jack-in-the-box and stood before me, scarecrow-like, with arms outstretched and his clothes hanging in shapeless pouches from his sial-like frame.

"Look at me! This suit cost me nine dollars and I have worn it for a year. My shirt cost 40 cents, my collar six and my necktie eight. Mean to say I am not as well dressed as you?"

"That is a matter of personal opinion. Anyway, it is none of your business so long as I pay you for my living. At any rate I have never had to ask you for money." He reached forward with his long arm and began thumping me on the chest with his bony knuckles.

"Hey! Wouldn't you though if you thought you could get it? Wouldn't you though, Mr. Peacock, with your fine clothes, if you thought you could wheedle a dollar out of me? But you know your Uncle Abner ain't fool enough to let you have it. I'd rather trust it to Bruce, for with all his foolishness he has got twice the sense that you have. He takes chances and some day may win a fortune, while you only spend, spend, spend. Get a cent from me! I'd like to see you." With a quick run he gathered up the money, shoved it into the safe, spun the combination until it rattled like a roulette wheel and faced me again with his nose wrinkled. I faced him in a boiling rage. For while I had always cherished the natural and legitimate hope that I, as his next of kin, might some day profit by reason of his accumulative instincts, he could have left his money strewn broadcast throughout the house from the time I had first come to live with him and I would not have touched a dollar of it, even had I known I never would be even suspected. Furthermore, none had a better reputation for honesty than myself, and his everlasting treatment of me as a potential thief had always nauseated me. Not caring how he might regard the act, I drew the key to the front door from my pocket and flung it on the table before him. It was the only key to the house I had ever possessed and its surrender left me without means of entrance, but without another word I stalked out into the open, banging the door behind me. Never had I been in a more villainous mood than now as I strode through the trees on my way downtown.

I desired to see Bruce again. I was concerned to know just what turn his despondency might take, and I thought that I might cheer him up a bit. Knowing his usual place of habitat in his hours of recreation it was not long before I had located him. He was humped up buzzard-like in a semi-private room of a cafe, his hands sounding the depths of his pockets and his chin resting upon his breast. A cocktail, apparently untasted, stood on the table before him. I sat down on the other side of the board, noticing that his eyes were closed.

He had the general appearance of a man who had been drinking. Ordinarily immaculate of person, he was now semi-disreputable. He had not shaved that day, his necktie was disarranged and his hair ruffled. However, as I had never known him to be the worse for liquor, I was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt in this case and ascribe his unkemptness to brooding over his misfortune.

"Bruce," I said after a moment. He opened his eyes and looked at me vacantly, but made no reply. In a general way I attempted to console him, but he only shook his head in silence, and finding my efforts unrewarded I finally abandoned them. Ordering a mild decoction for myself, I touched his glass and drank to the hope that better times might soon be on the wing. He emptied his glass without reply, and sank back into his dejected posture. Five minutes later he seemed to be half asleep, and I determined to take him bodily in hand. Not wishing to have him seen in that condition by any friends who might chance to enter, I shook him into a semblance of life. Then making him take my arm, I assisted him into the open air. Darkness had already fallen and the lights of the skyscrapers were beginning to sparkle. He lurched heavily against me, and seeing that his condition was rapidly becoming hopeless, I signaled a cab, opened the door and thrust him inside. He fell upon the seat, muttering some address to which he wished to be taken and I turned to the jehu who was propping him up.

"He will be all right in a couple of hours. At present he is not feeling particularly well and should be taken care of," I said significantly. The other nodded his understanding. Then with brief instructions for him to handle his charge right side up with care, I turned away as he picked up the reins.

I formulated my own plans for the evening. In my then state of mind, I did not care to exert myself, preferring to go where I could sit quietly and be entertained by others. I decided upon the theater. A block further on I happened across a banking acquaintance, who, upon my invitation, joined me. At the end of the performance we emerged. It was now in the neighborhood of 11 o'clock, and, shaking hands, we parted for the night.

Having thrown down my key to the house, I decided to stay downtown until morning. Crossing the street, I entered the Pacific hotel. I knew the clerk at the desk, and saluting him by name, I asked him to assign me to a room a few floors up and fronting on the alley, such a location being quieter in the early morning hours than a room facing the street. He gave me the key and a bell boy immediately showed me to my number.

Not being accustomed to retiring before 12, I was not in the least sleepy. Leaving the light burning, I threw myself upon the bed as scene by scene I ran the film of the events of the day before my mental eyes. And so deeply did I become engrossed in this that when I awoke myself and looked at my watch it was after midnight. I arose and stood before the mirror, searching my own face keenly, my mind still reverting to my quarrel with my uncle and its probable future consequences. While I did not imagine that in his present state of mind he would be particularly concerned as to where I was, I resolved to call him up and advise him of my whereabouts. It did not seem that it could do any harm, and undoubtedly it was good policy to try and conciliate him now that we had given full vent to our spleen. Going to the wall telephone, I asked for his number, and a moment later heard his querulous voice over the wire as he demanded to know who it was that called him at that hour. I answered him with the quietness I always strove to employ except upon rare occasions when I for the moment lost command of myself. I wished him well and told him where I was and that I had decided to remain downtown for the night. His answering sentences exploded in my ear like distant firecrackers.

"That's right. Just like you. Spend your money for hotel bills when you have a better bed at home. And I suppose you will pay those pirates a dollar for your breakfast. All right,

go ahead, young millionaire. But I will charge you for your breakfast here, anyway. Don't you forget that."

"I will be home at nine o'clock, the usual Sunday breakfast hour," I returned in an unruffled tone. He snorted and rang off without deigning to reply further, and I hung up the receiver with the feeling that I had done my part towards a reconciliation. For the present at least, the matter most rest where it was. Then calling up the hotel office and leaving an order for them to awaken me at seven o'clock, I locked the door and turned out the light.

At the ringing of the call bell the next morning at the hour I had designated, I arose and began my toilet. I had slept but little, and that little was more like the semi-consciousness which comes from exhaustion rather than the slumber of repose. I felt unrefreshed, despondent, self-angry. Nor was my appearance in the glass satisfactory as I ran my eyes over my reflection, I had little desire for breakfast, but inasmuch as I had told Uncle Abner that I would be present at that occasion, I paid my bill and took a car homeward. The morning was a midsummer dream. The foliage had been bathed by a night shower and the air was perfumed with the incense of growing green things. As I passed up the walk among the oaks I could not but realize how beautiful the grounds were despite their unhelpfulness, and that it would cost me a pang after all to leave this place permanently should my quarrel with its owner develop to that acute stage. For it was under these trees that I had passed so many pleasant hours with Clare, or wandering through the marble halls of my air castles. Mrs. Tebbets admitted me upon my summons; but no sooner had I entered the sleepy halls than my fondness for the place vanished in the old depression which always came upon me as I viewed their loneliness. It was like passing into a vault, cheerless, gloomy, the echoes mocking my footsteps. I went straight to my own room. The door was closed between where I was and my uncle's apartment, and I stood listening. Usually he was up and could be heard pattering around before this, but now all was silence beyond. I opened the door that separated our quarters and stepped forward. But on the threshold I stopped with my eyes sweeping the scene that lay before me.

The room was in a state of disorder. Everywhere was to be seen the hand of violence. Bureau drawers had been ransacked and left yawning; the bed was a twisted tangle of sheets and crumpled pillows; clothing was scattered about the floor. But what was more startling than anything else was the condition of the iron safe. Its combination had been shattered by some powerful explosive and its door, standing wide, gave a full view into its looted interior. With the sweat starting from my forehead I rushed forward.

I inspected it with a glance. No money remained in it, but the papers looked as though they had not been disturbed beyond a general overhauling. I swept my eyes about the room and under the bed. No glimpse of my uncle rewarded me and I ran from the room with loud calls for Mrs. Tebbets. It was her custom not to disturb us of Sunday mornings until she announced breakfast, and that she knew nothing of the condition of affairs in the upper part of the house had been evidenced by her ordinary demeanor as she admitted me. From room to room of the upper story I went in rapid search of the missing one, and at last, in one of the dark closets I found him and dragged him forth. He was bound hand and foot, and I bent over him and shook him. He seemed to be rather more unconscious than otherwise, but he certainly was alive.

Puffing up the stairs in response to my cries, Mrs. Tebbets reached me just as I had finished my hasty diagnosis. I immediately removed a handkerchief which had been tied around his mouth, slashed the cords which bound him, and together we carried him to my room and placed him upon the bed. I tore open his night garment and examined him superficially, but could discover no marks of physical violence save about the throat. There it was red and puffy. Mrs. Tebbets, in a hysteria of excitement, was useless as an assistant, and hastening to the telephone I called up first Doctor Courtney, our family physician, and then the nearest police station. After that I went back to the victim.

He was breathing more freely now that the handkerchief had been removed, and presently his eyes opened and he stared at me. When I spoke to him, however, he did not answer. Having done everything for him that I could think of for the moment, I sat down upon the edge of the bed to await the arrival of those whom I had summoned.

At the bedside shot significant glances from one to another in the silence. I disliked to break the news of his loss to him, not knowing what kind of a scene he would make, but decided I might as well do so now as at any other time. "They got whatever money was in the safe, uncle," I said. "They blew the combination into old junk and cleaned out the currency to the last cent." He uttered a gasp and tried to sit up, but the physician pushed him back upon the pillow.

"Burglarized the safe! Got all the money!" he yelled, hoarsely, his eyes rolling upward so that the whites were to be seen. The expression upon his face was a ghastly reflection of the shock to his soul, and despite his miserliness I felt sorry for him as I grasped one twitching hand. His cheeks turned to the yellowish white of a fish's belly as he straightened out to his full length with a groan that was horrifying in its death mimicry.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Real One.

"I was once retained in a case in a down state village where I had known most of the inhabitants ever since I was a child," says Attorney George B. Harris. "In examining some of the witnesses I forgot myself and used their given names. The judge interrupted me.

"Mr. Harris, he said, 'I believe it would be more dignified to address these witnesses by their surnames.'

"I apologized to the court and reformed—temporarily. A little later, an awkward, slovenly farmer was called to the stand. I was well acquainted with the chap—so was everybody else in the room.

"Now, Rube," I began.

"Wait a moment," called the judge. He leaned over and took a good look at the witness. Then he turned to me and added:

"You may proceed, sir; I see no reason why the witness should not be called 'Rube.'"—Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Why the Stamps Don't Stick.

Postmaster-General Hitchcock is receiving complaints from all sections of the country that the glue on stamps is worthless and that they will not stick.

According to officials of the department, the glue is damaged by water bugs that nibble it off the stamps. The Washington postoffice is infested with these insects, and, as many stamps are kept ready for sale on desks and in drawers, the bugs have easy access to them. The department has no scheme for combating the bugs. Insecticides, if placed in the glue, must poison people who moisten stamps with their tongues.

He Knew It.

"Is there any money in this business that you are trying to promote?"

"There certainly is."

"How do you know?"

"Why, I myself put in a lot."

His Age.

"You don't mean to say she is going to marry that man? Why, he is old enough to be her father."

"Yes—but still young enough to be her errand boy."



At Last in One of the Dark Closets I Found Him.

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