SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE

BY EARL DERR BIGGERS

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CHAPTER XIX.

A Man From the Dark.

FOR fully five seconds Mr. Magee and the man with whom he had collided stood facing each other on the balcony. The identical moon of the summer romances now hung in the sky, and in its white glare Baldpate mountain glittered like a Christmas card.

"A lucky chance," said Mr. Magee. "You're a man I've been longing to meet, especially since the professor left his window open this afternoon."

"Indeed!" replied the other calmly. "May I ask what you want of me?"

"Certainly!" Mr. Magee laughed. "A little package. I think it's in your pocket at this minute. A package no bigger than a man's hand."

The stranger made no reply, but looked quickly about over his shoulder at the path along which he had come and then past Mr. Magee at the road that led to freedom.

"I think it's in your pocket," repeated Mr. Magee, "and I'm going to find out."

"I haven't time to argue with you," said the holder of the seventh key. His voice was cold, calculating, harsh. "Get out of my way and let me pass or"—

"Or what?" asked Billy Magee.

He watched the man lunge toward him in the moonlight. He saw the fist that had the night before been the Waterloo of Mr. Max and the mayor start on a swift, true course for his head. Quickly he dodged to one side and closed with his opponent.

Back and forth through the snow they ploughed, panting, grappling, straining. Mr. Magee soon realized that his adversary was no weakling. He was forced to call into play muscles he had not used in what seemed ages—not since he sported of an afternoon in a rather odorous college gymnasium. In moonlight and shadow, up and down, they reeled, staggered, stumbled, the sole jarring notes in that picture of Baldpate on a quiet winter's night.

"You queered the game last time," muttered the stranger. "But you'll never queer it again."

Mr. Magee saved his breath. Together they crashed against the side of the inn. Together they squirmed away across the balcony to the railing. Still back and forth, now in the moonlight, now in shadow, wildly they fought. Once Mr. Magee felt his feet slip from beneath him, but caught himself in time. His strength was

Up and Down They Reeled, Staggered and Stumbled.

going—surely—quickly. Then suddenly his opponent seemed to weaken in his grip. With a supreme effort Magee forced him down upon the balcony floor and tumbled on top of him. He felt the chill of the snow under his knees and its wetness in his cuffs.

"Now!" he cried to himself.

The other still struggled desperately. But his struggle was without success, for deftly Billy Magee drew from his pocket the precious package about which there had been so much debate on Baldpate mountain. He clasped it close, rose and ran. In another second he was inside No. 7 and had lighted a candle at the blazing logs.

Once more he examined that closely packed little bundle; once more he found it rich in greenbacks. Assuredly it was the greatly desired thing he had fought for the night before. He had it again. And this time, he told himself, he would not lose sight of it until he had placed it in the hands of the girl of the station.

The dark shadow of the man he had just robbed was hovering at his windows. Magee turned hastily to the door. As he did so it opened and Hayden entered. He carried a pistol in his hand; his face was hard, cruel, determined; his usually expressionless eyes lighted with pleasure as they fell on the package in Mr. Magee's possession.

"It seems I'm just in time," he said, "to prevent highway robbery."

"You think so?" asked Magee.

"See here, young man," remarked Hayden, glancing nervously over his shoulder, "I can't waste any time in talk. Does that money belong to you? No. Well, it does belong to me. I'm going to have it. Don't think I'm afraid to shoot to get it. The law permits a man to fire on the thief who tries to fleece him."

"The law, did you say?" laughed Billy Magee. "I wouldn't drag the law into this if I were you, Mr. Hayden. I'm sure it has no connection with events on Baldpate mountain. You would be the last to want its attention to be directed here. I've got this money and I'm going to keep it."

Hayden considered a brief moment and then swore under his breath.

"You're right," he said. "I'm not going to shoot. But there are other ways, you whippersnapper"— He dropped the revolver into his pocket and sprang forward. For the second time within ten minutes Mr. Magee steadied himself for conflict.

But Hayden stopped. Some one had entered the room through the window behind Magee. In the dim light of the candle Magee saw Hayden's face go white, his lips twitch, his eyes glaze with horrible surprise. His arms fell limply to his sides.

"Good God, Kendrick!" he cried.

The voice of the man with whom Billy Magee had but a moment before struggled on the balcony answered;

"Yes, Hayden. I'm back."

Hayden wet his lips with his tongue.

"What—what brought you?" he asked, his voice trailing off weakly on the last word.

"What brought me?" Suddenly, as from a volcano that had long been cold, fire blazed up in Kendrick's eyes. "If a man knew the road from hell back home what would it need to bring him back?"

Hayden stood with his mouth partly open. Almost a grotesque picture of terror he looked in that dim light. Then he spoke in an odd, strained tone, more to himself than to any one else:

"I thought you were dead," he said. "I told myself you'd never come back. Over and over—in the night—I told myself that. But all the time I knew—I knew you'd come."

A cry—a woman's cry—sounded from just outside the door of No. 7. Into the room came Myra Thornhill. Quickly she crossed and took Kendrick's hands in hers.

"David!" she sobbed. "Oh, David, is it a dream—a wonderful dream?"

Kendrick looked into her eyes, sheepishly at first, then gladly as he saw what was in them. For the light there under the tears was such as no man could mistake. Magee saw it. Hayden saw it, too, and his voice was even more lifeless when he spoke.

"Forgive me, David," he said. "I didn't mean"—

And then as he saw that Kendrick did not listen he turned and walked quietly into the bedroom of No. 7, taking no notice of Cargan and Bland, who, with the other winter guests of Baldpate, now crowded the doorway leading to the hall. Hayden closed the bedroom door. Mr. Magee and the others stood silent, wondering. Their answer came quickly—the sharp cry of a revolver behind that closed door.

It was Mr. Magee who went into the bedroom. The moonlight streamed in through the low windows and fell brightly on the bed. Across this Hayden lay. Mr. Magee made sure. It was not a pleasant thing to make sure of. Then he took the revolver from the hand that still clasped it, covered the quiet figure on the bed and stepped back into the outer room.

"He—he has killed himself," he said in a low voice, closing the bedroom door behind him.

There was a moment's frightened hush; then the voice of Kendrick rang out:

"Killed himself? I don't understand. Why should he do that? Surely not because—no"— He looked questioningly into the white face of the girl at his side; she only shook her head. "Killed himself," he repeated, like a man wakened from sleep. "I don't understand."

On tiptoe the amateur hermits of Baldpate descended to the hotel office. Mr. Magee saw the eyes of the girl of the station upon him, wide with doubt and alarm. While the others gathered in little groups and talked, he took her to one side.

"When does the next train leave for Reuton?" he asked her.

"In two hours—at 10:30," she replied.

"You must be on it," he told her. "With you will go the $200,000 package. I have it in my pocket now."

She took the news stolidly and made no reply.

"Are you afraid?" asked Magee gently. "You mustn't be. No harm can touch you. I shall stay here and see that no one follows."

"I'm not afraid," she replied. "Just startled, that's all. Did he—did he do it because you took this money—because he was afraid of what would happen?"

"You mean Hayden?" Magee said. "No. This money was not concerned in—his death. That is an affair between Kendrick and him."

"I see," answered the girl slowly. "I'm so glad it wasn't—the money. I couldn't bear it if it were."

"May I call your attention," remarked Magee, "to the fact that the long reign of 'I'm going to' is ended and the rule of 'I've done it' has begun? I've actually got the money. Somehow it doesn't seem to thrill you the way I thought it would."

"But it does—oh, it does!" cried the girl. "I was upset for a moment. It's glorious news. And with you on guard here I'm not afraid to carry it away—down the mountain—and to Reuton. I'll be with you in a moment ready for the journey."

She called Mrs. Norton, and the two went rather timidly upstairs together. Mr. Magee turned to his companions in the room and mentally called their roll. They were all there—the professor, the mayor, Max, Bland, Peters, Miss Thornhill and the newcomer Kendrick, a man prematurely old, grayed

"I will shoot any one who makes a move."

at the temples and with a face yellowed by fever. He and the professor were talking earnestly together and now the old man came and stood before Magee.

"Mr. Magee," he said seriously, "I learn from Kendrick that you have in your possession a certain package of money that has been much buffeted about here at Baldpate inn. Now, I suggest—no, I demand"—

"Pardon me, professor," Mr. Magee interrupted. "I have something to suggest, even to demand. It is that you and every one else present select a chair and sit down. I suggest, though I do not demand, that you pick comfortable chairs, for a vigil that you are about to begin will prove a long one."

"What do you mean?" asked the mayor of Reuton, coming militantly to Professor Bolton's side.

Magee did not reply. Miss Norton and her mother came downstairs, the former wrapped in a great coat. She stood on the bottom step, her cheeks flushed, her eyes ablaze. Mr. Magee, going to her side, reflected that she looked charming and wonderful and wished he had time to admire, but he hadn't. He took from one pocket the pistol he had removed from the hand of Hayden; from the other the celebrated package of money.

"I warn you all," he said, "I will shoot any one who makes a move for this bundle. Miss Norton is going to take it away with her. She is to catch the 10:30 train for Reuton. The train arrives at its destination at 12. Much as it pains me to say it, no one will leave this room before 12:15."

"You—crook!" roared Cargan.

Mr. Magee smiled as he put the package in the girl's hand.

"Possibly," he said; "but, Mr. Cargan, the blackness of the kettle always has annoyed the pot."

The little professor of comparative literature stepped forward and stood pompously before Magee.

"One moment," he remarked. "Before you steal this money in front of our very eyes I want to inform you who I am and who I represent here."

"This is no time," replied Magee, "for light talk on the subject of blonds."

"This is the time," said the professor warmly, "for me to tell you that Mr. Kendrick here and myself represent at Baldpate inn the prosecuting attorney of Reuton county. We"—

Cargan, big, red, volcanic, interrupted.

"Drayton!" he bellowed. "Drayton sent you here? The rat! The pup! Why, I made that kid! I put him where he is! He won't dare touch me!"

"Won't he?" returned Professor Bolton. "My dear sir, you are mistaken. Drayton fully intends to prosecute you on the ground that you arranged to pass ordinance No. 45, granting the Suburban railway the privilege of merging with the Civic in exchange for this bribe of $200,000."

"He won't dare!" cried Cargan. "I made him!"

"Before election," said the professor, "I believe he often insisted to you that he would do his duty as he saw it."

"Of course he did," replied Cargan. "But that's what they all say."

"He intends to keep his word."

CHAPTER XX.

The Professor Sums Up.

THE mayor of Reuton slid into the shadows.

"As I was saying, Mr. Magee," continued the professor, "Mr. Kendrick and I came up here to secure this package of money as evidence against Cargan and—the man above. I speak with the voice of the law when I say you must turn this money over to me."

For answer Magee smiled at the girl.

"You'd better go now," he said. "It's a long walk down the mountain."

"You refuse?" cried the professor.

"Absolutely. Don't we, Miss Norton?" said Magee.

"Absolutely," she repeated bravely.

"Then, sir," announced the old man crushingly, "you are little better than a thief, and this girl is your accomplice."

"So it must look on the face of it," assented Magee. The girl moved to the big front door, and Magee, with his eyes still on the room, backed away until he stood beside her. He handed her his key.

"I give you," he said, "to the gods of the mountain. But it's only a loan—I shall surely want you back. I can't follow ten feet behind as I threatened—it will be ten hours instead. Good night and good luck."

She turned the key in the lock.

"Billy Magee," she whispered, "yours is a faith beyond understanding. I shall tell the gods of the mountain that I am to be—returned. Good night, you—dear."

She went out quickly and Magee, locking the door after her, thrust the key into his pocket. For a moment no one stirred. Then Mr. Max leaped up and ran through the flickering light to the nearest window.

There was a flash, a report and Max came back into the firelight examining a torn trousers leg.

"I don't mean to kill anybody," explained Mr. Magee—"just to wing him. But I'm not an expert—I might shoot higher than I intend—so I suggest that no one else try a break for it."

"Mr. Magee," said Miss Thornhill, "I don't believe you have the slightest idea who that girl is nor what she wants with the money."

"That," he replied, "makes it all the more exciting, don't you think?"

"Do you mean," the professor exploded, "you don't know her? Well, you young fool!"

"It's rather fine of you," remarked Miss Thornhill.

"It's asinine if it's true," the professor voiced the other side of it.

"I hope every one is quite comfortable," remarked Mr. Magee, selecting a seat facing the crowd. "It's to be a long wait, you know."

In Upper Asquewan Falls the clock on the old town hall struck 9. Mr. Magee, on guard in Baldpate's dreary office, counted the strokes. She must be halfway down the mountain now. Tonight there would be no need of a troubadour to implore "Weep No More, My Lady." William Hallowell Magee had removed the cause for tears.

It was a long vigil he had begun, but there was no boredom in it for Billy Magee. He was too great a lover of contrast for that. As he looked around on the ill assorted group he guarded he compared them with the happier people of the inn's summer nights, about whom the girl had told him. Instead of these surly or sad folk sitting glumly under the pistol of romantic youth he saw maids garbed in the magic of muslin flit through the shadows. Lights glowed softly. A waltz came up from the casino on the breath of the summer breeze. Under the red and white awnings youth and joy and love had their day—or their night. The hermit was on hand with his postal carded romance. The trees gossiped in whispers on the mountain.

And, too, the rocking chair fleet gossiped in whispers on the veranda, pausing only when the admiral sailed by in his glory. Eagerly it ran down its game. This girl—this Myra Thornhill—he remembered, had herself been a victim. After Kendrick disappeared she had come there no more, for there were ugly rumors of the man who had fled. Mr. Magee saw the girl and her long absent lover whispering together in the firelight. He wondered if they, too, imagined themselves at Baldpate in the summer; if they heard the waltz in the casino and the laughter of men in the grill room.

Ten o'clock, said the town hall pompously. She was at the station now. In the room of her tears she was waiting—perhaps her only companion the jacky of the "See the World" poster, whose garb was but a shade bluer than her eyes. Who was she? What was the bribe money of the Suburban railway to her? Mr. Magee did not know, but he trusted her, and he was glad she had won through him. He saw Professor Bolton walk through the flickering half light to join Myra Thornhill and Kendrick.

It must be half past by now. Yes—from far below in the valley came the whistle of a train. Now—she was boarding it—she and the money! Boarding it—for where? For what purpose? Again the train whistled.

"The siege," remarked Mr. Magee, "is more than half over, ladies and gentlemen."

The professor of comparative literature approached him and took a chair at his side.

"I want to talk with you, Mr. Magee," he said.

"A welcome diversion," assented Magee, his eyes still on the room.

"I have discussed matters with Miss Thornhill," said the professor in a low voice. "She has convinced me that in this affair you have acted from a wholly disinterested point of view. A mistaken idea of chivalry, perhaps. The infatuation of the moment for a pretty face—a thing to which all men with red blood in their veins are susceptible—a pleasant thing that I would be the last to want banished from the world."

"Miss Thornhill," replied Billy Magee, "has sized up the situation perfectly—except for one rather important detail. It is not the infatuation of the moment, professor. Say, rather, that of a lifetime."

"Ah, yes," the old man returned. "Youth—how sure it always is of that. I do not deprecate the feeling. Once, long ago, I, too, had youth and faith. We will not dwell on that, however. Miss Thornhill assures me that Henry Bentley, the son of my friend John Bentley, esteems you highly. She asserts that you are in every respect, as far as her knowledge goes, an admirable young man. I feel sure that after calm contemplation you will see that what you have done is very unfortunate. The package of money, which in a giddy moment you have given into a young lady's keeping, is much desired by the authorities as evidence against a very corrupt political ring. I am certain that when you know all the details you will be glad to return with me to Reuton and do all in your power to help us regain possession of that package."

And now the town hall informed Mr. Magee that the hour was 11. He pictured a train flying like a black shadow through the white night. Was she on it—safe?

"Professor Bolton," he said, "there couldn't possibly be any one anywhere more eager than I to learn all the details of this affair—to hear your real reason for coming to Baldpate inn and to have the peroxide blond incident properly classified and given its niche in history. But let me tell you again my action of tonight was no mere madness of the moment. I shall stick to it through thick and thin. Now, about the blonds."

"The blonds!" repeated the professor dreamily. "Ah, yes. I must make a small confession of guilt there! I did not come here to escape the results of that indiscreet remark, but I really made it—about a year ago. Shall I ever forget? Hardly. The newspapers and my wife won't let me. I can never again win a new honor, however dignified, without being referred to in print as the peroxide blond advocate. On the night when Mr. Kendrick and I climbed Baldpate mountain I remarked as much to him. And so it occurred to me that if I found any need of explaining my presence here the blond incident would do very well. It was only—a white lie."

"A blond one," corrected Mr. Magee. "I forgive you, professor."

"To begin with," continued the professor, "I am a member of the faculty of the University of Reuton, situated, as you no doubt know, in the city of the same name. For a long time I

"What you have done is very unfortunate."

have taken a quiet interest in our municipal politics. I have been up in arms—linguistic arms—against this odd character Cargan, who came from the slums to rule us with a rod of iron. Every one knows he is corrupt; that he is wealthy through the sale of privilege; that there is actually a fixed schedule of prices for favors in the way of city ordinances. I have often denounced him to my friends. Since I have met him—well, it is remarkable, is it not, the effect of personality on one's opinions? I expected to face a devil, with the usual appurtenances. Instead I have found a human, rather likable man."

Mr. Magee smiled over to where the great bulk of Cargan slouched in a chair.

"He's a bully old scout," he remarked.

"Even so," replied the professor, "his high handed career of graft in Reuton must come to a speedy close. He is of a type fast vanishing through the awakening public conscience. And his career will end. I assure you, despite the fact that you, Mr. Magee, have seen fit to send our evidence scurrying through the night at the behest of a chit of a girl. I beg your pardon—I shall continue. Young Drayton, the new county prosecutor, was several years back a favorite pupil of mine. After he left law school he fell under the spell of the picturesque mayor of Reuton. Cargan liked him and he rose rapidly. Drayton had no thought of ever turning against his benefactor when he accepted the first favors, but later the open selling of men's souls began to disgust him. When Cargan offered him the place of prosecutor a few months ago Drayton assured him that he would keep his oath of office.

"It was in me, remember," he went on, "that Drayton confided his resolve to serve the public. I was delighted at the news. A few weeks ago he informed me his first opportunity was at hand. Through one of the men in his office he had learned that Hayden of the Suburban Electric was seeking to consolidate that road, which had fallen into partial disrepute under his management during the illness of Thornhill, the president, with the Civic. The consolidation would raise the value of the Suburban nearly two million dollars—at the public's expense. Hayden had seen Cargan. Cargan had drafted ordinance No. 45 and informed Hayden that his price for passing it through the council would be the sum you have juggled in your possession on Baldpate mountain—$200,000."

"A mere trifle," remarked Magee sarcastically.

"So Cargan made Hayden see Through long experience in these matters the mayor has become careless. He is the thing above the law, if not the law itself. He would have had no fear in accepting this money on Main street at midday. He had no fear when he came here and found he was being spied on.

"But Hayden—there was the difficulty that began the drama of Baldpate inn. Hayden had few scruples; but, as events tonight have well proved, Mr. Magee, he was a coward at heart. I do not know just why he lies on your bed upstairs at this moment a suicide. That is a matter between Kendrick and him and one which Kendrick himself has not yet fathomed. As I say, Hayden was afraid of being caught. Andy Rutter, manager of Baldpate inn for the last few summers, is in some way mixed up in the Suburban. It was he who suggested to Hayden that an absolutely secluded spot for passing this large sum of money would be the inn. The idea appealed to Hayden. Cargan tried to laugh him out of it. The mayor did not relish the thought of a visit to Baldpate mountain in the dead of winter, particularly as he considered such precautions unnecessary. But Hayden was firm. This spot, he pointed out, was ideal, and the mayor at last laughingly gave in. The sum involved was well worth taking a little trouble to gain."

Professor Bolton paused and blinked his dim old eyes.

"So the matter was arranged," he continued. "Mr. Bland, a clerk in Hayden's employ, was sent up here with the money, which he placed in the safe on the very night of our arrival. The safe had been left open by Rutter. Bland did not have the combination. He put the package inside, swung shut the door and awaited the arrival of the mayor."

"I was present," smiled Magee, "at the ceremony you mention."

"Yes? All these plans, as I have said, were known to Drayton. A few nights ago he came to me. He wanted to send an emissary to Baldpate—a man whom Cargan had never met—one who could perhaps keep up the pretense of being here for some other reason than a connection with the bribe. He asked me to undertake the mission, to see all I could and if possible to secure the package of money. This last seemed hardly likely. At any rate, I was to gather all the evidence I could. I hesitated.

"I had loudly proclaimed my championship of civic virtue, however, and here was a chance to serve Reuton. I acquiesced. The day I was to start up here poor Kendrick came back. He, too, had been a student of mine, a friend of both Drayton and Hayden. Seven years ago he and Hayden were running the Suburban together under Thornhill's direction. The two young men became mixed up in a rather shady business deal, which was more of Hayden's weaving than Kendrick's. Hayden came to Kendrick with the story that they were about to be found out and suggested that one assume the blame and go away. I am telling you all this in confidence as a friend of my friends, the Bentleys, and a young man whom I like and trust despite your momentary madness in the matter of yellow locks. We are all susceptible.

"Kendrick went. For seven years he stayed away in an impossible tropic town, believing himself sought by the law, for so Hayden wrote him. Not long ago he discovered that the matter in which he and Hayden had offended had never been disclosed after all. He hurried back to the states. You can imagine his bitterness. He had been engaged to Myra Thornhill, and the fact that Hayden was also in love with her may have had something to do with his treachery to his friend."

(To Be Continued Next Wednesday.)

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