

THE CROSS-CUT

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CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

—15—

They reached the mouth of the Silver Queen. Harry reconnoitered a moment before he gave the signal to proceed. Within the tunnel they went, to follow along its regular, rising course to the stop where, on that garish day when Taylor Bill and Blindeste Bozeman had led the enthusiastic parade through the streets, the vein had shown. It was dark there—no one was at work. Harry unhooked his carbide from his belt, lit it and looked around.

"It ain't coming from 'ere!" he announced. "It's—" then his voice dropped to a whisper—"what's that?"

Again a rumbling had come from a distance, as of an ore car traveling over the tram tracks. Harry extinguished his light, and drawing Anita and Fairchild far to the end of the stop, flattened them and himself on the ground. A long wait, while the rumbling came closer, still closer; then in the distance, a light appeared, shining from a side of the tunnel. A clanging noise, followed by clattering sounds, as though of steel rails hitting against each other. Finally the tramping once more—and the light approached.

Into view came an ore car, and behind it loomed the great form of Taylor Bill as he pushed it along. Straight to the pite of ore he came, unhooked the front of the tram, tripped it and piled the contents of the car on top of the dump which already rested there. With that, carbide pointing the way, he turned back, pushing the tram before him. Harry crept to his feet.

"We've got to follow!" he whispered. "It's a blind entrance to the tunnel som'eres."

They rose and trailed the light along the tracks, flattening themselves against the timbers of the tunnel as the form of Taylor Bill, faintly outlined in the distance, turned from the regular track, opened a great door on the side of the tunnel, which, to all appearances, was nothing more than the ordinary heavy timbering of a weak spot in the rocks, pulled it far back, then swerved the tram within. Then, he stopped and raised a portable switch, throwing it into the opening. A second later the door closed behind him, and the sound of the tram began to fade in the distance. Harry went forward, creeping along the side of the tunnel, feeling his way, stopping to listen now and then for the sound of the fading ore car. Behind him were Fairchild and Anita, following the same procedure. And all three stopped at once.

The hollow sound was coming directly to them now. Harry once more brought out his carbide to light it for a moment and to examine the timbering.

"It's a good job!" he commented. "You couldn't tell it five feet off!"

"They've made a cross-cut!" This time it was Anita's voice, plainly angry in spite of its whispering tones. "No wonder they had such a wonderful strike," came scathingly. "That other stop down there—"

"Ain't nothing but a salted proposition," said Harry. "They've cemented up the top of it with the real stuff and every once in a while they blow a lot of it out and cement it up again to make it look like that's the real vein."

"And they're working our mine!" Red spots of anger were flashing before Fairchild's eyes.

"You've said it! That's why they were so anxious to buy us out. And



"We've Got to Follow."

that's why they started this two-million-dollar stock proposition when they found they couldn't do it. They knew if we ever 't that vein it wouldn't be any time until they'd be caught on the job. That's why they're ready to pull out—with somebody else's million. They're getting at the end of their rope. Another thing; that explains them working at night."

Anita gritted her teeth. "I see it now—I can get the reason. They've been telephoning Denver and holding conferences and all that sort of thing. And they planned to leave these two men behind here to take all the blame."

"They'll get enough of it!" added Harry grimly. "They're miners. They could see that they were making a straight cross-cut tunnel on to our vein. They ain't no children, Blindeste."

just write it out. Let him up, Harry."

The big Cornishman obeyed grudgingly. "Make hit folsome, Bill—tell just 'ow you did it!"

And Taylor Bill, bloody, eyes black, lips bruised, obeyed. Fairchild took the bescrawled paper and wrote his name as a witness, then handed it to Harry and Anita for their signatures. At last, he placed it in his pocket and faced the dolorous high-jacker.

"What else do you know, Bill?"

"About what? Rodaine? Nothing—except that we were in cahoots on this cross-cut. There isn't any use denying it"—there had come to the surface the inherent honor that is in every metal miner, a stalwartness that may lie dormant, but that, sooner or later, must rise. There is something about taking wealth from the earth that is clean. There is something about it which seems honest in its very nature, something that builds big men in stature and in ruggedness, and it builds an honor which fights against any attempt to thwart it. Taylor Bill was finding that honor now. He seemed to straighten. His teeth bit at his swollen, bruised lips. He turned and faced the three persons before him.

"Take me down to the sheriff's office," he commanded. "I'll tell everything. I don't know so awful much—



"That's Maurice! I Got a Glimpse of His Face!"

because I ain't tried to learn anything more than I could help. But I'll give up everything I've got."

"And how about him?" Fairchild pointed to Blindeste, just regaining consciousness. Taylor Bill nodded. "He'll tell—he'll have to."

They trussed the big miner then, and dragging Bozeman to his feet, started out of the cross-cut with them, Harry's carbide pointing the way through the blind door and into the main tunnel. Then they hauled to bundle themselves tighter against the cold blast that was coming from without. On—to the mouth of the mine. Then they stopped—short.

A figure showed in the darkness, on horseback. An electric flashlight suddenly flared against the gleam of the carbide. An exclamation, an excited command to the horse, and the rider wheeled, rushing down the mountain side, urging his mount to dangerous leaps, sending him plunging through drifts where a misstep might mean death, fleeing for the main road again. Anita Richmond screamed:

"That's Maurice! I got a glimpse of his face! He's gotten away—go after him somebody—go after him!"

But it was useless. The horseman had made the road and was speeding down it. Rushing ahead of the others, Fairchild gained a point of vantage where he could watch the fading black smudge of the horse and rider as it went on and on along the rocky road, finally to reach the main thoroughfare and turn swiftly. Then he went back to join the others.

"He's taken the Center City road!" came his announcement. "Is there a turn-off to it anywhere?"

"No," Anita gave the answer. "It goes straight through—but he'll have a hard time making it there in this blizzard. If we only had horses!"

"They wouldn't do us much good now! Climb on my back. You can handle these two men alone?" This to his partner. The Cornishman grunted.

"Yes. They won't start anything. Why?"

Fairchild moved to the man's side. "My promise and my partner's promise that if you tell the whole truth, we'll do what we can to get you leniently. So tell the truth; weren't you the man who held up the Old Times dance?"

Taylor Bill's breath traveled slowly past his bruised lips.

"Rodaine gave me one hundred dollars to pull it," came finally.

"And you stole the horse and everything—"

"And cached the stuff by the Blue Poppy, so I'd get the blame!" Harry wiggled his mustache fiercely. "Tell it or I'll pound your head into a jelly!"

"That's about the size of it."

But Fairchild was fishing in his pockets for pencil and paper, finally to bring them forth.

"Not that we doubt your sincerity, Bill," he said sarcastically. "But I think things would be a bit easier."

his arm. Once, as they floundered through a knee-high mass, Fairchild's arm went quickly about her waist and he lifted her against him as he literally carried her through. When they reached the other side, the arm still held its place—and she did not resist. Some way, after that, the stretch of road faded swiftly. Almost before he realized it, they were at the outskirts of the city.

Grudgingly he gave up his hold upon her, as they hurried for the sidewalks and for the sheriff's office. There Fairchild did not attempt to talk—he left it all to Anita, and Bardwell, the sheriff, listened. Taylor Bill had confessed to the robbery at the Old Times dance and to his attempt to so arrange the evidence that the blame would fall on Harry. Taylor Bill and Blindeste Bozeman had been caught at work in a cross-cut tunnel which led to the property of the Blue Poppy mine, and one of them, at least, had admitted that the sole output of the Silver Queen had come from this thieving encroachment. Then Anita completed the recital—of the plans of the Rodaines to leave and of their departure for Center City. At last, Fairchild spoke, and told the happenings which he had encountered in the ramshackle house occupied by Crazy Laura. It was sufficient. The sheriff reached for the telephone.

"No need for hurry," he announced. "Young Rodaine can't possibly make that trip in less than two hours. We've got plenty of time—hello—Central?

"Yeh—Long Distance. Want to put in a call for Center City?"

A long wait, while a metallic voice streamed over the wire into the sheriff's ear. He hung up the receiver. "Blocked," he said shortly. "The wire's down."

"But there's the telegraph!"

"It'll take half an hour to get the operator out of bed—office is closed. Nope. We'll take the short cut. And we'll beat him there by a half-hour!"

Anita started.

"You mean the Argonaut tunnel?"

"Yes. Call up there and tell them to get a motor ready for us to shoot straight through. We can make it at thirty miles an hour, and the skip in the Reunion mine will get us to the surface in five minutes. The tunnel ends sixteen hundred feet underground, about a thousand feet from Center City," he explained, as he noted Fairchild's wondering gaze. "You stay here. I'll be getting my car warmed up to take us to the tunnel."

A moment more and a steel door clanged upon the two men, while the officer led the way to his motor car. There he looked quizzically at Anita Richmond, piling without hesitation into the front seat.

"You going too?"

"I certainly am," and she covered her intensity with a laugh, "there are a number of things that I want to say to Mr. Maurice Rodaine—and I haven't the patience to wait!"

Bardwell chuckled. The doors of the car slammed and the engine roared louder than ever. Soon they were churning along through the driving snow toward the great buildings of the Argonaut Tunnel company, far at the other end of town. There men awaited them, and a tram motor, together with its operator. The four pursuers took their places on the benches of the car behind the motor. The trolley was attached. Then clattering over the frogs, green lights flashing from the trolley wire, the speeding journey was begun.

Three miles, four, five, while Anita Richmond held close to Fairchild as the speed became greater and the sparks from the wire above threw their green, vicious light over the yawning stretch before them. A last spurt, slightly down-grade, with the motor pushing the wheels at their greatest velocity; then the crackling of electricity suddenly ceased, the motor slowed in its progress, finally to stop.

A greasy being faced them and Bardwell, the sheriff, shouted his mission.

"Get to catch some people that are making a get-away through Center City. Can you send us up in the skip?"

"Yes, two at a time."

"All right!" The sheriff turned to Harry. "You and I'll go on the first trip and hurry for the Ochoco road. Fairchild and Miss Richmond will wait for the second and go to Sheriff Mason's office and tell him what's up. Meet us there," he said to Fairchild, as he went forward.

A long wait followed while Fairchild strove to talk of many things—and failed in all of them. Things were happening too swiftly for them to be put into crisp sentences by a man whose thoughts were muddled by the fact that beside him waited a girl in a whipcord riding suit—the same girl who had leaped from an automobile on the Denver highway and—

It crystallized things for him momentarily.

"I'm going to ask you something—a while—something that I've wondered and wondered about." I

"It's very, very awful!" came in a low, mock-awful voice. "But—" then the laugh came again—"maybe if you're good and—well, maybe I'll tell you after a while."

She laughed at him.

"You really didn't think I was the Smelter bandit, did you?"

"Darned if I know what I thought. And I don't know what I think yet."

"It's very, very awful!" came in a low, mock-awful voice. "But—" then the laugh came again—"maybe if you're good and—well, maybe I'll tell you after a while."

"Honest?"

"Of course I'm honest! Isn't that the skip?"

Fairchild walked to the skip, stepped in, and lifted Anita to his side.

darkness which Fairchild longed to turn to his advantage, darkness which seemed to call to him to throw his arms about the girl at his side, to crush her to him, to seek out with an instinct that needed no guiding light the laughing, pretty lips which had caused him many a day of happiness, many a day of worried wonderment. He strove to talk away the desire—but the grinding of the wheels in the narrow shaft denied that. His fingers twitched, his arms trembled as he sought to hold back the muscles, then, yielding to the impulse, he started—

"Da-a-a-gone it!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

But Fairchild wasn't telling the truth. They had reached the light just at the wrong, wrong moment. Out of the skip he lifted her, then inquired the way to the sheriff's office or this, a new county. The direction was given, and they went there. They told their story. "You say Bardwell and your partner went out on the Ochoco road to head the young 'un off?"

"Yes. Do you think—?"

But a noise from without cut off the conversation. Stamping feet sounded on the steps, the knob turned, and Sheriff Bardwell, snow-white, entered, shaking himself like a great dog, as he sought to rid himself of the effects of the blizzard.

"Hello, Bardwell, what'd you find?"

"No matter how much a person dislikes another one—it's, it's—always a shock."

Anita came closer. "You mean that he's dead?" The sheriff nodded.

"He must have rushed his horse too hard. When we got to him he was just about gone—tried to stagger to his feet when we came up, but couldn't make it. Kind of acted like he'd lost his senses through fear or exposure or something. Asked me who I was, and I said Bardwell. Seemed to be tickled to hear my name—but he called it Barnham. Then he got up on his hands and knees and clutched at me and asked me if I'd drawn out all the money and had it safe. Just to humor him, I said I had. He tried to say something after that, but it wasn't much use. The first thing we knew he'd passed out. That's where Harry is now—took him over to the mortuary. There isn't anybody named Barnham, is there?"

"Barnham?" The name had awakened recollections for Fairchild; "why he's the fellow that—"

But Anita cut in.

"He's a lawyer in Denver. They've been sending all the income from stock sales to him for deposit. If Maurice asked if he'd gotten the money out, it must mean that they meant to run with all the proceeds. We'll have to telephone Denver."

The message went through. Then the two sheriffs rose and looked at their revolvers.

"Now for the tough one," Bardwell made the remark, and Mason smiled grimly. Fairchild rose and went to them.

"May I go along?"

"Yes, but not the girl. Not this time."

Anita did not demur. Fairchild walked to her side.

"You won't run away," he begged.

"I'll be right here," she answered, and with that assurance, he followed the other two men out into the night.

Far down the street, where the rather bleak outlines of the hotel showed bleaker than ever in the frigid night, a light was gleaming in a second-story window. Mason turned to his fellow sheriff.

"He usually stays there. That must be him—waiting for the kid."

The three entered. Tiptoeing, they went to the door and knocked. A high-pitched voice came from within.

"That you, Maurice?"

Fairchild answered in the best imitation he could give.

"Yes. I've got Anita with me."

Steps, then the door opened. For just a second Squint Rodaine stared at them in ghastly, sickly fashion. Then he moved back into the room, still facing them.

"What's the idea of this?" came his forced query. Fairchild stepped forward.

"Simply to tell you that everything's blown up as far as you're concerned. Mr. Rodaine."

"You needn't be so dramatic about it. You act like I'd committed a murder! What've I done that you should—"

"Just a minute. I wouldn't try to act innocent. For one thing, I happened to be in the same house with you one night when you showed Crazy Laura, your wife, how to make people immortal. And we'll probably learn a few more things about your character when we've gotten back there and interviewed—"

He stopped his accusations to leap forward, clutching wildly. But in vain. With a lunge, Squint Rodaine had turned, then, springing high from the floor, had seemed to double in the air as he crashed through the big pane of the window and out to the twenty-foot plunge which awaited him. Hurriedly they gained the window, but already the form of Rodaine had unrolled itself from the