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CHAPTER XXVI.  
THE ESCAPE.

We are lost! Such was the cry that fell from the lips of Nora Warner, as she realized the dreadful nature of their situation. The great gate was locked, and Jack had failed to find the key. Then there had come that mocking laugh, and, turning, they had beheld the madhouse doctor close behind them, his evil face wreathed with a nemouriac smile of triumph, as they could readily understand, and to cap the climax, the alarm bell had commenced to ring out its brazen notes of warning.

Here was indeed a climax. What was to be done? The poor girl had suffered so much of late that her spirits were readily quenched, and she believed that all was at once lost. All she could do was to cling to the arm of her lover, who would soon be so powerless to save her, and look as if horribly fascinated at the fiendish doctor.

Fortunately for her, she had in Jack a master mind, one quick to act and ready to perceive. He saw at once that there was only one chance left for them. In less than five minutes the minions of the demon doctor would be swooping down upon the spot, and unless they had managed to quit it, all would be indeed lost. The key—search for it!

These words fell quickly from his lips in a hoarse whisper, and of course, were intended for the girl. His thoughts were bent upon other subjects, and suddenly like a tiger he sprang at the doctor. Nora Warner saw them clinch and fall heavily upon the earth, and then, with a mental prayer for her lover, she turned to hunt for the missing key.

That Jack had the best of the fight so far she readily believed, for the doctor had been taken rather by surprise, and she did not fancy that he was able to cope with her lover, for whose prowess she seemed to have a great admiration. Besides, it was quite certain that the mad-house doctor would have made an outcry so as to have drawn some of his keepers to the spot, had he been allowed the liberty of doing so, and the fact that he did not give Nora hope.

She stood before the gate for a few seconds lost in thought. She had an indistinct recollection of having from the grated window of her cell seen some one place the key on several occasions in a different hole from that which usually contained it and during that short space of time her thoughts were very busy as she endeavored to remember where this receptacle was. All at once it seemed to flash across her mind like an inspiration.

She uttered a low cry of delight and hope, mingled with fear lest the key should not be there, and springing forward inserted her hand in the orifice. It was a time to shiver in suspense, for should she fail to find that which she sought, then all would be lost. Thank Heaven, the key was there! Eagerly she drew it out. All then was not yet lost.

She lost not a second in inserting it in the lock. It was a ponderous key for her hands to turn, but excitement had lent her new strength, and she was a giant for the time being. The key turned, the gate was open. When she realized this fact the young woman uttered a cry of joy, and hastily taking out the key inserted it in the lock outside, so that they could place a barrier in the way of pursuit by locking the gate after them, which it must be admitted was a very wise move on the part of the girl.

Meanwhile, how progressed affairs between Jack and the mad-house doctor? The latter was a wiry individual and no mean antagonist for even an athlete; but his opponent besides being inordinately strong and supple, was urged forward by the combined powers of love and hate, and this rendered him a giant indeed. He had leaped upon Dr. Grim so suddenly that the latter was not even enabled to cry out ere he felt his throat seized in a grip of iron and himself borne to the ground.

Of course he struggled desperately, for he believed his life to be in danger, and what will not a man do for his life? Thus for the space of a minute, it was nip and tuck between the two, although it was soon made manifest that the young man had the doctor in his hands. It would not have taken very much to have caused Jack to choke the life out of the wretch while he had his hands upon him, such was his hatred of the man, and his bitter memory of the wrong Nora had suffered at his hands. As it was, after he had gotten him fully in his power, he took great delight in choking him till he was black in the face and otherwise treating him as he had treated many a patient before then. Remembering all the cruelties he had heard of and witnessed, Jack was visiting his just indignation upon the mad-house doctor, and that this specious chastisement was not very agreeable to the party on whom it fell can be readily imagined. He had just about finished his work when a cry of alarm from Nora reached his ear, and looking up he saw in the moonlight three of the keepers rapidly bearing down upon them from the direction of the house. To act with Jack was the work of an instant. Casting the limp and apparently lifeless form of the sadly-demoralized doctor

from him, he sprang to his feet. The keepers were only a dozen yards away as he bounded through the opening while Nora held the gate open for him and no sooner did she see that he was through than, with all her strength, she closed the ponderous structure. Jack was quickly at her side, and, seeing the key in the lock, comprehended her strategy. Just as he turned this the three keepers on the inside hurled themselves against the covered gate but they had been a few seconds to late.

With a laugh, Jack hurled the heavy key far away among the bushes. Then, holding his revolver in one hand, and assisting Nora with the other he rapidly left the spot. It would be some time before a regularly organized pursuit could be started, for they would have to first resuscitate the doctor; and Jack chuckled to think what a sweet task they would have before them as he remembered how black the mad-house doctor had become in the face before he was done with him.

Before this time came it might be expected that the two fugitives would be quite a distance away, for they would be given a little start, which of course would be improved. Would they hunt them at all? Knowing the implacable hatred of the mad-house doctor for any one who had injured him, they could well believe that if he was soon brought back to consciousness he would at once institute a hot pursuit, which would be kept up as long as chance remained. Jack did not fear this, however, for he was a man brave as a lion, and besides, did he not have under his protecting care the woman whom he loved better than life! Under the circumstances he would have died sooner than allow her to be taken back, knowing what her fate would be.

The neighborhood of the mad-house was singularly lonely, not a house being in sight either up or down the river; but Jack knew where he was aiming for, having studied the country well when he came and before applying for the situation. Along through the dense undergrowth they made their way, leaving the mad-house further behind them all the while; although for a time all seemed going well, danger was not far away. The night was clear, and the moon, fair mistress of the night, rode in the heavens like a wheel of molten silver. Wherever the trees cast shadows upon the ground there seemed to be a nest of dark serpents that writhed and twisted in the most wonderful manner when a breeze stirred the branches overhead. Suddenly Nora laid her hand upon the arm of her companion and brought him to a full pause. Listen! she said hoarsely.

They stood like statues for half a minute, their ears on the alert for sounds, but the silence of the grave seemed to rest upon all nature, except for the slight noise of the insects, which were not very numerous. It was strangely solemn, standing there and waiting for a repetition of the sound that had first alarmed Nora. What was it? Had it been a human shout or a cry of distress? The very silence seemed suggestive of evil, and a shiver crept over him as he allowed his thoughts to take this turn. Hark! there it was again. Clearly it reached their ears this time, and Jack recognized the sound as one he had often heard among the swamps of the South. It was the long-drawn bay of a blood-hound. The doctor had set loose his dogs.

CHAPTER XXV  
BRAVE JACK.  
The dreadful sound that came to the ears of the fugitives was enough to paralyze them, such was its terrible significance. Again the long-drawn bay was borne to their ears, and though but a dozen seconds had passed, they understood that it came from a point much nearer than before. There was no time to lose. The pursuers, led by the dogs, were fast overtaking them, and ere long the expected climax would come to pass. Come, said Jack, hastily, let us fly. The doctor himself must be with those who are in our rear, and should they come up with us, they would just as soon let the brutes attack us. Can you run, Nora?

She showed him that she could, but the thickets barred their progress considerably. They had the satisfaction of knowing, however, that their pursuers were no better off, for they could hear the impatient noises given vent to by the hounds as they struggled in leash. Jack still had his arm around his companion, but had long since replaced the revolver, as he needed his good right hand to assist him in his passage through the thickets, and, besides, he would probably have plenty of warning ere the pursuers came upon them. They had the satisfaction of knowing that all the while they were drawing nearer to their point of safety, and that if the pursuit took no livelier turn, and they were able to keep at their present pace all would be well.

The country seemed to grow still wilder but Jack knew he was going in the proper direction, for now and then they could catch a glimpse of the silvery service of the river beyond the hanging moss and masses of Virginia creepers that lay be-

tween it and them. Things were working nicely, and in their favor, too, so that Jack had no reason to complain; but he suspected that it was too good to last, and awaited with each passing minute for some change in the programme. It came. All at once the hounds took up a new cry, and no longer gave vent to the long drawn bay, but this had been supplanted by short, eager barks of eager satisfaction.

Jack's face turned a trifle pale, and he shut his teeth hard together, but his eyes flashed, and his frame seemed to become firm as rock. Either the hounds had been suffered to go free, or else they had slipped the leash; at any rate, they were untrammelled by masters, and were racing along after the fugitives, rapidly coming up with them. He had had much experience with blood-hounds in the South, and knew there was but one remedy for it. Perhaps, after all, it would be for the best, for the hounds once out of the way, their pursuers would have no means of finding out where they had gone, not being skilled in following a trail; yet it was far from a pleasant task the young man had before him.

Nora speedily comprehended the truth, for she saw that something had occurred to give her lover a start, and soon recognized the difference in the sounds back of them. Still she was brave, and uttered no word of fear, only striving to increase her pace to the utmost. To be continued.

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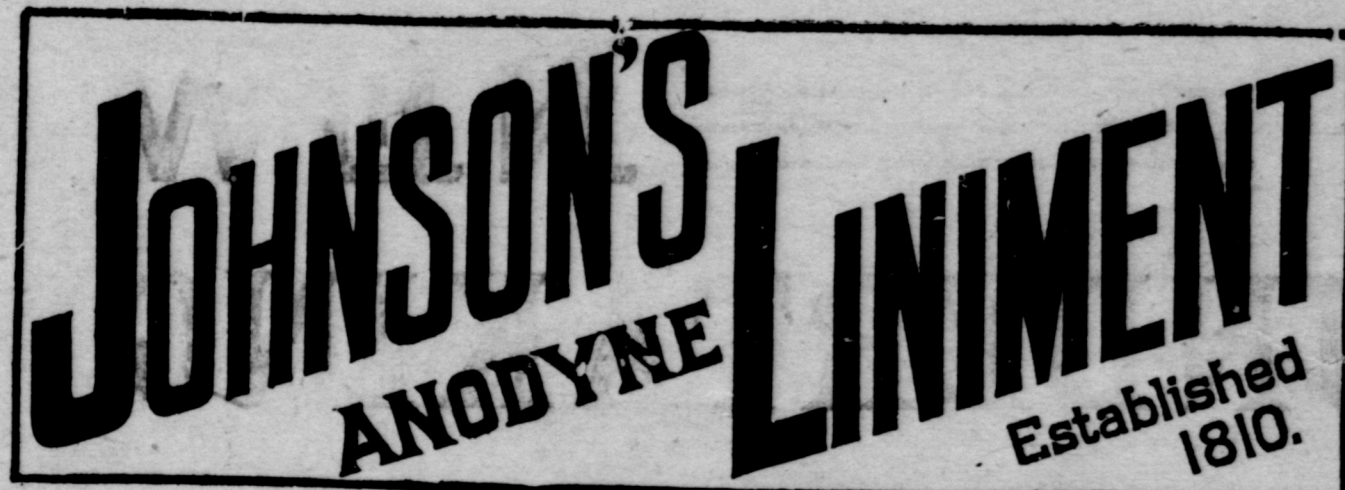
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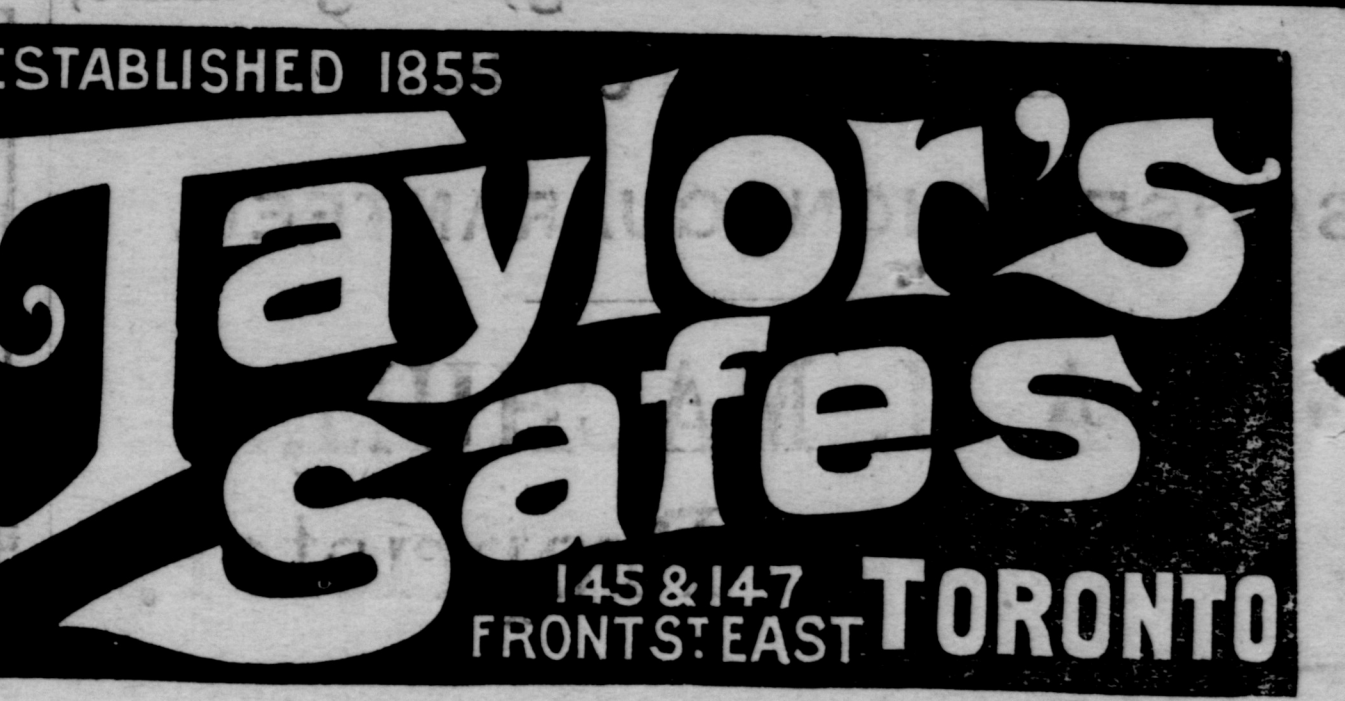
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