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The Lash of Circumstance

— BY —
Harry Irving Greene

Author of "Yosonde of the Wilderness"

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down town. You will remember upon that occasion I handed you your match safe after we had come down, and told you that I had picked it up at the foot of the ladder we had just left; mentioning the fact that climbing up and down under such conditions was apt to work a smooth article out of one's vest pocket. There is nothing truer than that statement, and I have no doubt but that is exactly what happened in the original case of your lost card receptacle. Now, as a matter of fact, I extracted that match safe from your pocket in the darkness when you were occupied in pressing the putty against the window in order that I might try an interesting experiment. The experiment succeeded. My calling your attention to the likelihood of losing such articles under conditions similar to those you had just experienced, started a train of thought in your mind. I knew you were worried by the loss of your card case and were very desirous of regaining it. My stratagem of the restored match box made it occur to you that it was possible that you had lost your card case in going out of the window on the night of the crime, and that there was a bare possibility that it had not been picked up and that you would find it among the rubbish back of the hotel. Having as I hoped sowed this thought in your mind, I made an excuse and left you. You will recall that the pretext I made for departing was that I wished to make another experiment alone. I immediately made it, the experiment consisting of my going rapidly to the head of the alley passing the Pacific Hotel and waiting there for you. True to my reasoning, you went straight to the place where I had found the card case, and lighting a cigar, made a brief search of the premises by the light of the match, of course unsuccessfully. Then, as you came hurrying into the street, you popped into my arms where I had stood to watch if you would fall into the trap. I remember your expression of surprise and displeasure at unexpectedly seeing me there. As an excuse I told you that the criminal was downtown then and moving around considerably himself. I imagine that remark rather got you to guessing. Whether you admire my strategy or not, I think you will have to admit it was a rather clever performance on my part." I twisted in my seat.

"I have nothing further to say at present than to repeat that you will repent of your idioy later," was my frigid comment. He laid aside the card case as having been disposed of, and began toying with the book-maker's ticket.

"Being now thoroughly convinced of your guilt, I began worrying my head for good, tangible proof of it—proof that would convince twelve men who would be naturally prepossessed in your favor at the beginning because of your appearance and good record. I hated to believe you capable of a thing like this, but was forced to; and, as you know, when I tackle a man in any contest, friendly or otherwise, I am going to down him if I can, leaving the matter of what I will do to him after I have thrown him dependent a good deal upon his own actions. If he yells quits I am always inclined to help him up, but if he wants to fight it out to the end, of course I am not going to give up. Now, your devotion to Mrs. Dace was well known about town, and when I became advised of it I began thinking hard. It went without saying that it was costing you money to court her, and I did not believe that your salary was sufficient for you to be able to keep up the pace long on that alone. Therefore I naturally wondered where you got the rest. When, in tracing you backward, I found out that you had been to the Derby, another bright thought occurred to me. You remember the mysterious man who came to your house with the forged note and got the suit of clothes you had worn on that day? Well, that was another artifice of mine. I wondered if there could possibly be any evidences in your pockets of a gambling transaction on that event. I know from personal experience how apt a man is to carry around expired passes and worthless truck of that kind for a considerable period before destroying them, so I sent an employe of mine to your house with an order written on one of the cards I had found calling for the Derby day suit, not knowing how else to describe it. He got it without trouble and I intercepted him on the way to the tailor and searched the pockets. In them I found your worthless ticket on Eagle Boy. You had bet \$1,000 on that race in the hope of winning ten thousand; had lost and failed to destroy your good-for-nothing ticket."

"I suppose, in your infinite wisdom, you also know that I had money left me by my father which I was at liberty to use as I saw fit," I broke in cuttingly. He acknowledged that he possessed that information.

"Yes, I found out that you had something in reserve; but the most important fact it conveyed to me was that you had taken to secret gambling in the hope of winning enough to enable you to keep up your new life. And knowing somewhat of the nature of men, I knew it was improbable to suppose that having made a big loss you would stop without an attempt to regain it. There is no public gambling to any extent going on in town except on the board of trade and the stock exchange; so the chances were if you were doing anything along that line it would be at one of those places. By a few days' of shadowing you I ascertained that you went to a certain broker's office, and having found that out it did not take me long to learn what medium you were backing. It was the same stock that Bruce

went broke on the day before the robbery, and I knew in the nature of things that you had gone broke at the same time he did. You were, therefore, as hard hit as he, but showed splendid nerve and never turned a hair or let a hint drop. I had now uncovered your sudden desperate plight at the exact time when you became possessed of the knowledge that your uncle had this large amount of money in an old, weak safe—the combination of dire extremity and sudden opportunity. It was your last hope, and you went after it as a drowning man goes after a floating car. You got it, and for a time it buoyed you." I writhed in my helplessness.

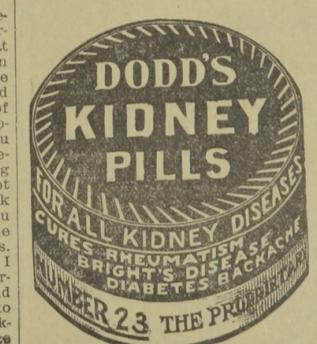
"And you supposed I conjured burglar tools out of the air by a wave of my hand, together with the skill to use them." He smiled retrospectively.

"No; I still had that difficulty to overcome. For a little while it had me stumped, and then I chanced to recall that you went for a year or so to a technical school and learned a good deal about the use of tools. Now, I knew that many young men keep their kit after leaving such places, and I wondered if you had. I also remembered having noticed a sort of a tool chest in the basement on the day I examined the premises, and I now concluded that it was time for me to know what was in it. Therefore I burglarized your basement by forcing the back door, picked the lock of the chest, and examined its contents. Among the tools I found one of exactly the size of the one that had bored the safe, and upon closer inspection found that a bit of it had been broken off in the operation, and that bit of steel you now see on the table before you. I found it on the morning I went over the room. You will remember what a painfully minute scrutiny I made of everything—even using my magnifying glass." I gathered up the card case, the tool and the bit of steel and placed them carefully in an envelope, which he deposited in his pocket. He then turned the piece of soiled paper and the lump of grayish matter.

"I had now the chain of proof connecting you with the crime forged with the exception of one link, which could I supply would make it practically unbreakable. On one of the mortgages which had been blackened by burnt powder was a fairly good imprint of a right thumb. I tore off the fragment of paper containing it and by placing it under the microscope could distinctly trace the lines. Of course such lines are not the same on any two persons in the world; and could I get an imprint of your thumb and by comparison find that they corresponded, there could then be no further doubt as to your hand being the one that had rummaged the safe. But this was a difficult thing to do without arousing your suspicions. I finally got around it, however, by organizing our burglary for the double purpose of getting the print and calling to your attention the probability of your having lost your card case in your previous climb. I told you at the time that I expected to get the proof from one who would not suspect that he had furnished it until I denounced him, and I guess I was correct. I don't believe it entered your head that you were making the evidence as you went along by which I could send you to the penitentiary. Neither did you suspect that I meant you when I told you if I ever unraveled the knot it would be because of the assistance and clues you had given me. Incidentally I might say that the office we burglarized belonged to a friend of mine who loaned it to me for the purpose. I had you jamb your thumb against the ball of soft putty and got an excellent impression of it, which I have had experts compare with the faint lines on the blackened paper. They assure me that they were both made by the same thumb."

It was a good thing that LeDuc had possessed the foresight to render me helpless and secure my revolver. In the frenzy of the moment I certainly would have used it upon one or both of us. I turned upon him desperately. "Do you think any jury would believe such evidence as that and convict me?" I demanded huskily. He wrinkled his forehead.

"I am sure I don't know. One can never tell. Do you want to give a jury the chance?" I made no answer and we sat in silence, the coldness of death upon me, my companion unmoving, but lynx eyed. Then once more he addressed me, and through his tones ran the old familiar friendliness of days long gone by.



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