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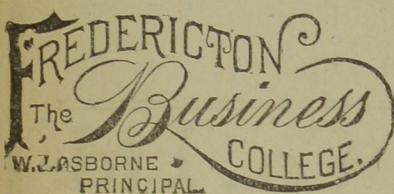
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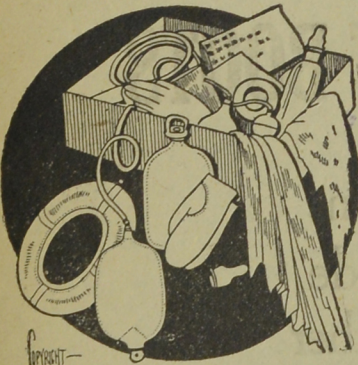
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## The Lash of Circumstance

— BY —  
**Harry Irving Greene**

Author of "Yosonde of the  
Wilderness"

Supplied Exclusively in Canada by The British & Colonial Press Service, Limited.

It would so seem. And what kind of a man does Bruce happen to be? I hesitated, endeavoring to choose my words with circumspection before answering a question which embraced so many qualifying and modifying phrases.

"Well, that is a hard question to answer offhand. He is a complex proposition, you know—a sort of a paradox. You should know him thoroughly before passing judgment. But comprehensively I should say that he is genial, generous, outspoken and inclined to be reckless along certain lines. But I never knew him to even contemplate doing a dishonest thing, and I don't believe that he ever did. The only two things that I ever knew him to do that might be criticized from a high moral standpoint are to occasionally take a few highballs or cocktails and to habitually speculate on 'Change. He is a broker, you know, and plays the game himself, like most of the rest of them."

"And his financial condition these days?" pursued my companion contemplatively. I shifted uneasily. It was plain that LeDuc was going to dig deep and ask me questions that would make it necessary for me to put Bruce in an unfavorable light, and it is not a pleasant task for one to be compelled to cast suspicion, even by inference, upon a life-long friend, especially when the friend is of his own blood. Yet a serious crime had been committed against both society at large and another of my kinsmen in particular, and should I conceal any essential fact that I knew and LeDuc discover that I had done so, it would put me in the miserable plight before Uncle Abner as having tried to shield some one and thus acted against him in the recovery of at least a portion of what had been pilfered from him. I did not for an instant believe that Bruce would even contemplate such an act, even though standing blindfold against the wall of financial despair, yet certainly there were things which in justice to everybody concerned he should explain; and while I did not doubt but that he could do so without difficulty, I disliked exceedingly to speak against him.

LeDuc sat quietly throughout my mental colloquy, eyeing me keenly. That my hesitancy in answering was unnoticed I did not for a moment flatter myself, for as well might one expect the fox to miss a movement of the cornered hare. "There seems to be something disagreeable in your mind. Perhaps you had better out with it," he suggested at length. "Remember that I am asking you, as a good citizen, to help me in this matter, and am taking you into my confidence. I therefore expect you to assist me to the fullest extent of your powers regardless of whom it may help or hurt; always bearing in mind that no innocent man need be afraid. Furthermore, you may trust me not to give any information you may convey to me any more publicity than the exigencies of the case demand. What is it you are keeping from me now?" "You have asked me as to my cousin's financial condition, and under my protest and your promise I will say this," I returned slowly. "He was in a miserable fix through losses on the exchange and came to Uncle Abner yesterday for a loan. Uncle Abner only grinned at him, as Bruce should have had sense enough beforehand to know he would. When I saw Bruce afterwards he was way down

on his luck and fairly desperate. He knew that uncle had the money in the house, because he was the one who called my attention to that fact, saying to me: 'My God, I must get hold of \$10,000 some way.' He then left me. When I saw him again he appeared to have been drinking. I put him in a carriage to get him out of sight and he was driven away, where I don't know, for I have not seen him since. That is all I know about that phase of the matter." My companion was following my every word and action with the intensity of a water-gate lynx, and when I had finished pounced upon my last and qualifying words instantly.

"You say that is all you know about that phase of the matter. Very good. But what else do you know?" Driven fairly into a corner I answered desperately.

"I know he had a key to the house. While I was sitting with him at the interview I have just mentioned he became angry at the thought of uncle's refusal to assist him, and struck the table several times with some small metallic object which he had tightly clenched in his hand. The familiar appearance of the object immediately attracted my attention and I managed to see enough of it to know that it was a key to this place. I was somewhat surprised, not knowing how he had come into possession of it; but thinking it was his own business I did not mention it to him in his then condition of mind. I do not believe that he knew that I had noticed it, or was even aware that he had exhibited it in his excitement, for immediately after his outburst he thrust it back into his overcoat pocket. I think that I have now without reservation told you all that I know concerning his words and actions within the last few days. He can undoubtedly explain his possession of the key as well as his whereabouts last night to your entire satisfaction. But I hope it will not even be necessary to hurt his pride by questioning him."

LeDuc leaned forward with deep interest in his face. "Then if there are but four keys to the front door known to be in existence, and as your uncle has his own as well as the one which you formerly possessed, and as Mrs. Tebbets still has hers, the only one

remaining to be accounted for should be in the possession of your other cousin, Miss Winton. If she still retains hers, then the one Bruce had must of necessity be a duplicate, and a duplicate could not have been made without the maker having for a time had one of the originals. That phase of the matter we will take up, if necessary, when we come to it, but what we want to know now is regarding the originals. And to ascertain that we must know whether Miss Winton has parted keepership of hers. I must see her at once."

"Perhaps it would be as well for me to call her up over the wire and ask her to come here," I suggested. "Uncle will be glad to see her, and I know she will dance with anxiety to come when she hears about this." He nodded his acquiescence, and going to the telephone I briefly put her in possession of the news with the request that she come to us immediately. In her excitement and eagerness she dropped the ear instrument instead of replacing it upon the hook, and I could hear her as she rushed about the room calling upon her mother for her hat and gloves. Fifteen minutes later she was ringing at the front door. LeDuc shot me a look full of significance.

"Did you say that she and Bruce are engaged, or something to that effect?" he inquired, referring to a remark which I had dropped a few moments before. I nodded.

"So Bruce intimated to me. I knew they were desperately fond of each other, and he told me that had he not been wiped out he would have married her. At any rate, she does not seem to have her key with her this morning," was my answer. Down stairs we heard Mrs. Tebbets opening the door, and a moment later with a patter of feet and a rustle of skirts, Clara bounded in upon us. Her eyes were dilated and she seemed almost ready to burst from suppressed excitement. Her first words were about Uncle Abner and as to whether he was now entirely out of danger. I assured her that he was and then introduced LeDuc, requesting that she seat herself a moment with us before going into the other room. She dropped upon the edge of a chair, fidgeting and nervous. LeDuc, immediately all courtesy, laid aside his cigar.

"I will detain you but a moment, Miss Winton," he apologized, his faint habitual smile breaking into an affable one. "But as I am investigating this affair in the interests of your uncle and in the hope of recovering more or less of his money, I am going to assume that you, as one of the family, will be glad to give me your assistance. At the present moment I am devoting my attention to locating the keys of the house, it being evident that the premises were entered by the front door, as the back door was bolted from the inside. Will you be good enough to let me have yours for a few moments?" Clara moved nervously.

"It's queer about that key; I can't find it," she said hastily. "I always carry it in my purse, but when I searched for it a few moments ago on my way over here it was not there. For the life of me I cannot imagine where I could have misplaced it, for I have been very careful to always keep it in that one place. I simply know I have not lost it, but it is just as strange as it can be." She squirmed like a worried schoolgirl.

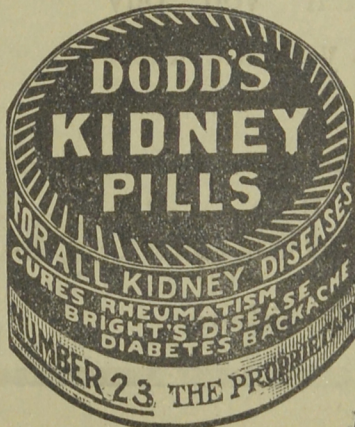
"Suppose we go back a little. When do you remember of having it last?" he pursued. Her forehead wrinkled with thought.

"Three, or four days ago when I came over here. I have not had occasion to think of it since until Tom called me up a few moments ago. I am as worried about it as I can be, but I am certain that I have not lost it."

I saw LeDuc's gaze run over the graceful form of the girl and then settle upon her face with an expression that was beyond doubt one of unequivocal approval. That Clara's heart was as open to the world as is the heart of a flower to the light of the sun, could harbor any secret as dark as this was preposterous to one who knew her. I had never met

a girl with sounder morals or better instincts, and her character she loved spun gold. And even though she loved Bruce and had always defended his frailties, I did not believe that she would have shielded him had she believed him guilty of an unnatural crime as this, matter of history though it is that one can never tell what heights or depths a woman can achieve to save the man who carries her heart. Quietly I asked her when she had seen Bruce last, and became instantly aware that my question had shut her on the rack, for a faint shadow flitted cloudlike across her face. Yet she answered me with her accustomed frankness.

(To Be Continued.)

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