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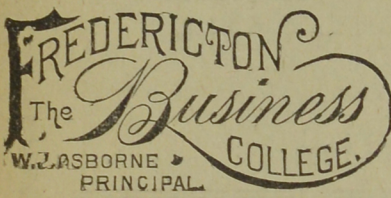
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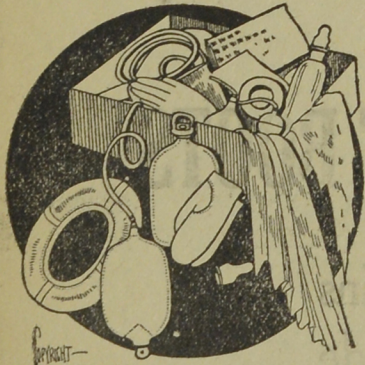
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The Lash of Circumstance

— BY —
Harry Irving Greene

Author of "Yosonde of the
Wilderness"

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

"Day before yesterday—and I do not understand it either. He was to see me yesterday evening, but he neither came nor sent word as to why he broke the engagement. It is not like him to do such a thing, and while I suppose there is some good reason back of it, I do not know what it is. Anyway, I am worried." She dropped her eyes and tapped gently on the floor with her toe. "I wish you would try and get him on the wire, Tom, and find out if he is all right. That is all I care to know at present." I assented and started for the telephone, but had made but a step or two before I heard his familiar ring at the door and a moment later his equally familiar voice from the hall below. Then up the stairs he came and at the first footfall I halted, listening. Usually he mounted something after the fashion of a scurrying cat in a series of light leaps, but now his feet pounded the boards with heavy uncertainty. I opened the door before him, but at the sight of his face I stepped back.

He advanced to the doorway, faltered there with one hand braced against the jamb and the crimson flushing his face as he saw Clare amongst us. His eyes were as red shot as a bloodhound's, and the hand that hung by his side was aspen. The unmistakable marks of an evil night were stamped about his mouth, and his usually clear face looked puttyish and mottled. I heard Clare gasp as she arose and slowly approached him with unbelieving eyes. He stepped aside as though to avoid her, his glance falling to the floor.

"I have heard about it—it is in the papers. Tell me the particulars," he said with a hoarse intonation. From the bottom of my heart I pitied him as I gently pulled the girl back to her seat and answered him in matter of fact tones.

"There is nothing to tell at present except that the safe was burglarized last night and the \$40,000 stolen. I spent the night downtown and found Uncle Abner bound and unconscious when I returned home this morning. He was not much hurt and is all right now. This is Mr. LeDuc, who has been engaged by Uncle Abner to try and ferret out the matter. I think that is the whole thing in a nut shell." He stood as if in a half daze, his gaze rambling over us.

"Any clues?" he mumbled at length. I made no spoken reply, merely bowing in the direction of the detective. And at the signal LeDuc immediately assumed vocal command.

"The only thing we have learned as yet which seems to be of any particular interest is that Miss Winton's key has mysteriously disappeared. All the others have been accounted for, and we are anxious to locate hers. She is unable to offer any explanation, and we therefore turn to you as one who is frequently in her company in the hope that you may offer a suggestion. Can you offer any thought along that line?"

He shook his head decisively and without hesitation, and I leaned back in my chair with a long breath of astonishment. I had been thoroughly confident that he would at once admit his possession of it and offer some explanation that would immediately satisfy everybody. LeDuc was looking steadily at him, apparently as puzzled by his answer as was I. To all outward appearances there was something hidden beneath the skin here, and I determined to make a quick thrust at the heart of the matter, bleeding him of his secret for his own good.

"Where were you last night, Bruce?" I asked quietly. The pallor of his cheeks took on the unhealthy hue of wet ashes and he stood mute with an unpleasant narrowing of his eyes. For a long minute the silence was unbroken. LeDuc scanning him impatiently and Clare, her pupils expanded, leaning far forward in her interest. Then he shifted sullenly upon his feet.

"I have no reply to make to that question at present."

I signalled to LeDuc, who instantly caught the cue. "But perhaps if the young lady would pardon us—" he murmured with a courteous bow to Clare. She arose upon the instant, and glancing neither to right nor left, passed into my uncle's apartments, while Bruce gloomed after her with tightened lips moved no muscle. As the door closed behind her I made another effort in his behalf.

"I wish you would be reasonable in this matter, Bruce. You ought to know that you can trust us implicitly when I give you my word as I now do. If you have any reason—any man's reason—to think that your whereabouts last night if known to Clare would distress her, Mr. LeDuc and I will bind ourselves upon our honor to keep your communication confidential. Later on you may make such explanation to her as you may desire, but in view of certain statements which you made to me it is necessary that our mutual friend here should know where you spent the night. Will you tell us?" A pale glow of passion, phosphorescent like, appeared deep behind his eyes and he answered me doggedly, almost defiantly.

"No. It is a matter which at present concerns only myself. Nor do I understand your insinuations when you say it is for my own good that I make confidants of you. What do you mean by such attempted intimidation?"

Ignoring the gathering storm, I answered him in a calm tone: "Bruce, I trust you implicitly and tell you now that it would take nothing less than a bombshell of absolute proof to shatter that belief. That being the case, when I assure you that I have reason to believe that it is for

your own good to do so, I think you might honor me with your confidence. Along that same line I am going to ask you another question. Do you object to showing us the contents of your pockets—everything?" He turned a dull red, seemed about to explode with the heat of his passion, and then growing suddenly cold bowed rigidly and began laying before us the contents of his clothes. It was the usual miscellaneous assortment of a man's personal belongings, and when he had finished a glance told us that the object for which we were searching was not among them.

"The pockets of your overcoat, please," purred LeDuc. With mocking deliberation Bruce began turning the folds and crevices of that garment inside out. Nothing of interest was exposed to us, and when he had finished we sat eyeing each other with silent lips. I broke the hush.

"Bruce, you had a key to the house yesterday. You pounded upon the table with it as we sat together downtown and then put it back in your side overcoat pocket. I noticed it distinctly. Now Clare's key has disappeared, and it is impossible for us to overlook the coincidence. Where did you get the one you had and which you do not now show us? We have a right to know, and for your own good you should tell, bearing in mind that we are all your friends and believe in you beyond telling." His eyes narrowed.

"You mean to say that I had a key to this house yesterday?" he returned with slow distinctness. I bowed.

For a moment he stood looking at me with an expression I had never seen him wear before creeping over his features. Then he turned away abruptly.

"I make no reply beyond saying that you are a very badly mistaken individual. Neither do I understand what you mean by all these insinuations, and furthermore I am independent. I have nothing more to say. You may both present the devil with my compliments for all I care."

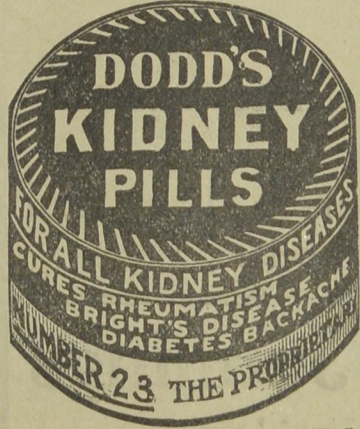
Pausing not at all, he went thumping down the stairs, while I sat staring at the detective, who in turn sat smiling queerly back at me.

CHAPTER X.

The expression on my companion's face remained unchanged as the sound of my cousin's footsteps was cut off by the bang of the closing door. The smile seemed to have grown into his features, so unaltered did it remain, and tiring of its monotony, I arose, and without apology, passed into the next apartment. Clare was sitting beside the bed of Uncle Abner, stroking one of his gorilla-like hands as he rolled his head from side to side with weak whisperings. Most of the lines which now harrowed his face were unfamiliar to me. Heretofore he had always appeared as a fairly well-preserved man of nearly foreseer, but now his face was as wrinkled as one's palm. He shot a sideways glance full of apprehension as I entered, but seeing it was only I resumed his mutterings. Clare's face was unwontedly serious. Her lips were tight fitting and thinned by compression; the laugh had entirely deserted her eyes, and altogether she was the picture of one who suffers uncomplainingly. Of course it took no wizardry to guess the cause of her unhappiness. Bruce, to whom she was engaged, and to whom she therefore must be devoted, had broken his faith with her without explanation or apology; and if that had not been enough in itself, his appearance had been sufficient to shock any one who had pride in him. I knew Clare as I knew the alphabet. There never was a woman more generous, nor one who once having decided to give gave more freely. Therefore, I knew that having bestowed her heart upon Bruce she had done so without stint or reservation. Her nature lay close to the surface, and what might have been a superficial wound to another would hurt her to the core of her being. Sympathizing deeply with her, I approached her from behind and took her cheeks in my palms. "It is bound to come out all right, Clare," I half whispered.

She freed her face by a slight forward movement, and Uncle Abner, closing his eyes wearily, lay for the moment inert on the pillow. They seemed to be ignoring me in their silence, and unable to think of anything to do or say which might relieve the situation, I turned away and left them to themselves. LeDuc had gotten upon his feet in my absence, and hat in hand, appeared to be waiting for me to go with him. The whole atmosphere of the place was offensive to me, and as I led him down the stairs and out into the open I filled my lungs to the uttermost, as a convict might who breathes the pure air of freedom after long confinement in a fetid cell. It was quite a while before either of us saw fit to speak.

(To Be Continued.)



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WORLD'S NEWS IN SHORT METRE

New York, Nov. 20—Bank of England rate unchanged.

Full senate banking committee meets today in effort to agree on some less important features of currency bill.

Howard Elliott, in address before New Haven chamber of Commerce pleads for fair play for his road.

N. Y. cotton exchange revision committee make radical changes in differences on low grade cotton.

"Iron Age" says slowing down in Iron and Steel operations has been more sharply accentuated during the past week.

Twelve industrials declined .31. Twenty rails declined .19.

President Huerta will vigorously defend his course in Message to Mexican Congress which assembles today. President Mudge, of Rock Island, in appealing for increased rates is alternative is demoralization of railroad service and eventually government ownership.

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