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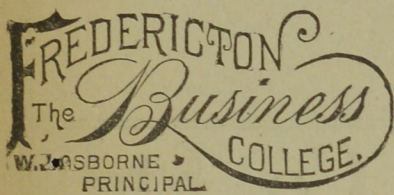
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## The Lash of Circumstance

— BY —  
**Harry Irving Greene**

Author of "Yosonde of the  
Wilderness"

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

**CHAPTER XI.**

I went back to the house. Clare had left my uncle's room and I heard her voice mingled with Bruce's on the lawn below. Uncle Abner had arisen and was carefully examining his papers as he rearranged them in their customary order. He had been hurt but little, and now that his blood was circulating freely again and the stiffness was disappearing from his limbs, he was not suffering bodily to amount to anything. But his humor was beastly. The look with which he greeted me as I entered was almost carnivorous.

"This is what comes of housing fly-by-nights who spend their money staying in hotels when they should be at home in the beds which they have already paid for," he snarled. "If you had been here it would not have happened. I don't believe there was more than one thief, and he could not have held you if you had any fight in you."

"He probably would not have tried it. At any rate, had I resisted I would have stood an excellent chance of being killed. Me who enter the houses of others to commit a crime at night know that they hold their own lives in the hollow of their hands and are prepared to meet resistance with bloodshed," I returned somewhat icily. But the coolness of my tone only made his wrath flame the hotter. "It won't make any difference. It was your business to be here when you knew there was so much money in the house instead of running away like a coward and leaving me to protect it all alone. And I suppose you expect you will inherit some of it after I am gone, but I'll show you," he yelled. The direct intimation that he would ignore me upon his death bed, and that he considered my life of less consequence than a fraction of his wealth, turned me from him without a word.

I went to my own room, where I stood at the window looking upon the grounds below. Bruce and Clare were wandering aimlessly about, and even at that distance I could see the worry that lay upon her face. As for Bruce, he seemed to have recovered a good deal of his old-time assurance. But presently he turned away with a curt nod while she stood for a moment watching him with a pathetic little clasp of her hands; then turned and came hurriedly into the house. I intercepted her at the head of the stairs and signalled for her to come into my apartments. She did so, seating herself in a chair that I drew for her. "Well," I said inquiringly. She shook her head.

Sympathetically I continued: "It is really too bad and I don't understand it either. Nobody in the world has more confidence in Bruce's honesty than I have, and if he would only speak I would believe him against a host of circumstances. But there are certain things which he as a man should come forward and explain. He did not produce the key and denied ever having had it, while I know it was in his possession yesterday. The only thing we could get out of him was his permission for us to go to an uncomfortable place. Have you any idea of how he became possessed of the key to the house which I saw him have yesterday?"

"I have not—assuming that you are right. We have been talking that same matter over and he says he had no key in his side coat pocket and never carries one there. I know that I never gave him mine, and its disappearance at this time can be nothing more than a strange coincidence. He also denies that he ever at any time had possession of my key, and I am satisfied that he did not, for the reason that if he had had I should have missed it. I don't care a snap what anybody thinks or says; I know Bruce is as puzzled over your charge that he had it as you seem to be over his denial." Her mouth set defiantly and I knew she would defend him to the last ditch should I attack him, which, of course, I had not the remotest idea of doing. Instead, I became even more mollifying, hoping to reason him out of his stubbornness through argument advanced to her.

"I know that his denial proves nothing any more than does the fact of his going broke on 'Change, or his making that silly remark that he was going to get \$10,000 some day. Neither would his refusal to tell us where he spent the night prejudice me, although it might seem somewhat singular, and under the circumstances be sufficient to arouse suspicion in those who do not know him. But the combination of all these things places him in a position before LeDuc which I regret to see him occupy. You and I have often discussed his outspokenness, and you have said that he did not know that there was a back door to anything. It is his present complete reversal of form and his evident desire to cover up something that ought to be revealed that puzzles me. Why don't he come out as he has always done before and tell us where he was at the time this happened? If for any reason he does not care to tell you, he at least might confide in me, knowing as he does that any secret would be safe in my keeping. Then I could investigate his statement merely as a matter of form, and having found it true I could satisfy LeDuc or anybody else without going into particulars. If on the other hand there is any reason why he don't care to take you or me into his confidence, he could at least talk to LeDuc, who would keep his secret, and we would be none the wiser. I sincerely regret his obstinacy, for even though it does not get him into any particular trouble it may compel him to go through an ordeal that may be unpleasant for us all. I know LeDuc well enough to believe that he will get at the bottom of

this affair if he possibly can, no matter whom he uncovers as he digs."

She breathed a little sigh. "Of course I appreciate all that, and I have tried to reason with him, but he would not listen to me any more than he did to you. He almost swore when I begged him to ignore me and tell you men all about himself. While I would stake my life upon his innocence of all complicity in this matter, I can explain it to myself in only one way, and I cannot force myself to believe even that." Our eyes met squarely.

"I am certain there is no other woman in the case; Bruce is not that kind," I stated positively.

She reddened, and her hands became tight little fists. "No, I will not believe such a thing of him," she cried with a slight quivering of the lips. Quickly she arose and passed into my uncle's apartments with head on high. It seemed too bad that I had been obliged to mention such a distasteful thing, but I knew well enough that despite herself it was hovering in her mind, and I wanted to add my convictions of his moral honesty to her own. It distressed me to see her unhappy, but deeming it best to let her have a little time in which to compose herself I did not follow her, leaving the house almost immediately thereafter, and in fact avoiding any further contact with my uncle that day. A little later I had gotten Mrs. Dace on the telephone and told her that I would like to see her as I was the possessor of rather startling news. She asked me to come to her at once.

She did not seem to be as surprised or interested at my recital as I thought the tale warranted. To be sure her eyes quickly arose to mine when I told her of the crime, and she gave me her undivided attention until I had finished; then seemed to be turning the affair over in her own mind, she allowed several minutes to elapse without comment.

"Whom do you suspect—I mean personally?" she then asked me, requested that she pledge herself to secrecy, which she did with a little laugh that told me that she considered such a formula superfluous.

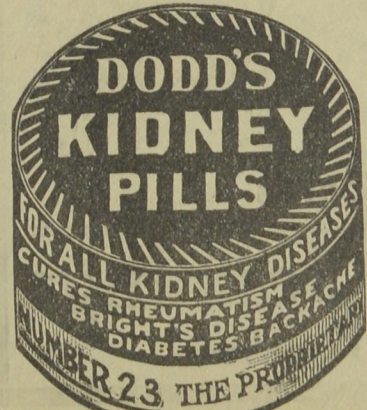
"I suspect absolutely no one. Yet I am puzzled and worried by Bruce's conduct. I do not attach much importance to his denial of having the key and our failure to find the denial part of it. Neither do I give great weight to his words about his going to get hold of a large sum of money. I take it for granted that when he said he was going to raise it somehow or other it was with the mental reservation that it was to be done honestly, of course. Also when it comes to his absolute refusal to tell us where he was last night I can imagine a solution of that, for when a man is under the influence of liquor he will sometimes do things that he would not think of were he in his right mind. It is also on record that sleep walkers sometimes commit burglaries when they are in a trance and are utterly irresponsible for their actions. Take that recent case that everybody was talking about. The person involved attended a dance and became very tired, fell asleep on the way home, skillfully broke into his own house and robbed himself of money that he had hidden away, and the next day remembered nothing about the matter. It was long afterwards that he happened to stumble across the money where he had secreted it in his semi-conscious state."

She did not appear to be particularly impressed by my statement. "I am inclined to believe that whoever robbed your uncle at least thought he knew what he was about," she answered with what I imagined was a faint suggestion of sarcasm. "However, Bruce, being somewhat indisposed and in an excited state, might have unconsciously let fall a remark in some public place, which, in connection with his perhaps exhibiting the key, led to its being stolen from him and the perpetration of the crime by someone else," I acquiesced.

"I have thought of that as a possible solution of the reason as to why he will not reveal his whereabouts, and I am certain it will not escape LeDuc. Perhaps Bruce is conscious of having been indiscreet in his speech or actions and is ashamed to tell about it. But this much is fairly certain. It is too great a stretch of the imagination to conceive that the attack upon the safe at this particular time was made at haphazard. The one who did it knew to a certainty that the money was in the house. And so far as we now know but four persons in the world had that knowledge, namely, Uncle Abner, Bruce, myself, and—" I paused, clearing my throat and giving her an opportunity to interrupt me if she chose. She did so promptly.

"You told me," she said sweetly. "Therefore it seems to lie between Bruce and myself." The opening that I had been feinting for was now before me and I thrust at it.

(To Be Continued.)

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