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Author of "The Gold Gleaners: A Story of the Cyanide Tanks," "Wilby's Dan," "His Friend the Enemy," "Rogers of Butte," Etc., Etc.

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CHAPTER X.

DARREL AGAIN AT THE HALF WAY HOUSE.

Darrel tarried for breakfast at the Half Way house. Here he had the first opportunity of testing the effectiveness of his disguise.

The shrinking personality of the man in corduroys was well assumed. In dismounting at the stable, Jimmie, the hostler, wished him a brusque "howdy," then averted his face; winked at a friend standing near by and thrust his tongue in his cheek.

Dislike was written large in the proprietor's face when Darrel entered the office. Darrel gave small heed to this and dropped into a chair with his eyes on a second man who happened to be in the room at that moment.

This man was none other than the youth whose money Darrel had saved at Hawkbill's and who had so well repaid the debt. The young man's keen glance swept the fugitive then turned away without the slightest sign of recognition.

"The sheriff went up War Eagle way last night," said the proprietor, resuming his conversation with the young man.

"With the intention of investigating the explosion?"

"I reckon that's it. He wants to make out whether the Sandy Bar chaps told the facts or jest rung in a version of the Rabian Nights onto him."

"I've been up the trail and looked over the ground and there can't be the slightest doubt of what happened." There was an undertone of regret and sadness in the young man's voice.

"Here's the p'int," returned the proprietor, argumentatively. "is it possible to snake a man off'n the earth in that a-way?"

"Five hundred pounds of dynamite—"

"I know about that. There ain't no question in my mind but that that much giant powder 'u'd lay out a regiment, but here: would it wipe out the remains of a regiment, or of even one man? It don't seem sensible, not ter me."

"There wasn't a trace of the wagon left; and if the wagon was sponged out so effectually why not Darrel?"

It was the same argument used by Cliff and it was unanswerable.

"Well," was the dogged answer, "I'll allers have my doubts, anyways. One thing's sure: Uncle Ab was in luck ter git jounced out'n the wagon before the blow-up, an' the team was in luck ter break away from the wagon an' git out o' range. The sheriff is comin' back this afternoon an' then maybe we'll know more. Wonder who gets Murgatroyd's thousand dollars?"

"It isn't likely that any one will get it."

"Hardly, that's a fact. It was quick action, don't ye think?" The proprietor laughed jeasingly. "The Sandy Bar boys were saved a bad job that might have looked ugly for them before they got through."

"They'd have lynched Darrel if they had caught him."

"Wouldn't they, though? They'd have hung him higher'n Haman an', 'tween you an' me, it would have been good enough fer 'im."

"That's where you're wrong," said the youth, warmly; "no mob ever yet had a moral right to lynch a man—"

"Oh, shucks!"

"And if the Sandy Bar boys had been able to carry out their lawless designs they'd have hung a man whose guilt had yet to be proved."

"You're plum crazy!" declared the proprietor.

Where the discussion would have led the two is problematical. Just then the Chinaman walked through the office with his song.

"Breakfus' leddy," he announced, and began hammering out the alarm in front of the door.

When Darrel sat down at the table the proprietor posted himself at the dining-room entrance and watched him

IN THE AFTERNOON HE READ AN ACCOUNT OF HIS DEATH IN A DAILY PAPER.

ominously. The fugitive's identity was not suspected, but the proprietor had heard of the extra plate-cleaning the day before and wanted to see if the insult would be repeated.

It was not. Darrel made a half-movement to take the plate from the table, but dropped it again after a quick glance at the man in the doorway.

The food was brought on, Darrel began to eat and the proprietor went away with a grim smile. Breakfast over, Darrel asked for a sheet of paper and an envelope.

In a few moments he had written the following:

"For the Sheriff: If you will call at the old cabin in the coulee to the left of the War Eagle trail, not far from the mine, you will find something that will interest you."

He did not sign the communication, but put it into the envelope and addressed it to "The Sheriff, on his way back to Anaconda," and left it with the proprietor for delivery.

When he rode away from the tavern Darrel was reassured. His new personality had withstood the test and he knew that he could trust it until such time as it ceased to be serviceable.

But one thing made him uneasy. That was the doubt, now twice expressed, that giant powder could be so comprehensive in its destructive powers.

To settle his question what could be better than to have the sheriff visit the hut in the coulee? The body of a smooth-faced man would be found, but evidences would be at hand to show that a beard had been removed.

Everything would point to a sudden act of self-destruction. It would be supposed that Nate Darrel, overcome with the hopelessness of his case, had done away with himself.

The fact that the fugitive had escaped the explosion in some remarkable way would silence the doubters.

Shortly before noon Darrel rode into Anaconda, turning aside and making for the livery barn nearest the Blackfoot trail. The hostler came grinning out to receive the horse.

"The calico carried you all right, eh?" the man inquired.

"Very well indeed. How much do I owe you for him?"

The hostler stared.

"Why," he answered, "you bought him from the old man. Don't want to pay for the brute twice, do you?"

Darrel was quick to take care of the emergency.

"I mean for his keep," he answered, with a shade of annoyance. "Will you keep him here for nothing?"

"You'll have to see the old man about that. He's gone home to dinner now."

Darrel untied the traveling-bag from the cantle and walked down the street. He passed the "Colonel's Own," silent and almost deserted, at that hour, and was soon at the hotel where he had put up during his brief stay in town a short time before.

"How do you do, Mr. McCloud," said the clerk, affably. "You're a little ahead of schedule, aren't you?"

"A little."

"I understood you to say you wouldn't be back until to-morrow. Two ladies called to see you, this morning, and left a card."

Darrel took the card as the clerk handed it over. "Mrs. Marian Gorton," ran the printed text, and underneath was written, in pencil: "and Miss Elise Avery."

"Did they leave any word?" asked Darrel, quietly.

"Said they'd call to-morrow afternoon—I told them you'd be back then."

This dilemma had been anticipated and Darrel knew it was not to be shirked. It was the one point of weakness in his new armor.

"We've kept your old room for you," went on the clerk. "I'll have the boy take up your satchel."

The boy was called and took possession of the traveling-bag. The clerk handed him a key and then Darrel followed him up stairs.

CHAPTER XI.

DARREL FACES THE ISSUE.

There was a sole-leather trunk in McCloud's room. It was locked but a small key ring in a pocket of the corduroys held a key that gave access to it.

No papers were found. There were two suits of clothes—both of the best quality—a supply of clean linen, cravats and other things usually found in a gentleman's wardrobe.

Darrel closed the trunk disappointedly and carried his search through the closet and dresser drawers. There was nothing there, all McCloud's belongings, apart from what he had taken with him in the traveling-bag, having been put away in the trunk.

The eastener had told the clerk he intended to return on the morrow, but it was perfectly evident that he had imagined he might be detained much longer. Had he left Anaconda with the deliberate intention of destroying himself?

When he went down stairs to dinner Darrel was revolving this question in his mind. In the afternoon he read an account of his death in a daily paper and gave diligent attention to the gruesome details.

It was a long article and began with an account of the murder of Sturgis, the arrest of Darrel and his night escape from the Sandy Bar jail. Then followed a summing up of all the known facts connected with the explosion on the War Eagle trail.

Nothing new was brought forward but the author of the account was not a doubter for he dwelt exhaustively on the vicarious methods of justice and pointed the whole affair with a moral.

Next morning another paper had more to say on the subject. Sheriff Scatterly had returned from the hills after a personal investigation and gave it as his opinion that the escaped murderer had been hurled into eternity in substantially the manner described by the men from Sandy Bar.

Abner Gryce's bronchos had run away: the wagon had collided with a boulder beside the trail, the horses had broken loose and the shock of the collision had set off the crystalized giant powder. That explained the arrival of the run-away team, practically uninjured, at the War Eagle mine.

Abner Gryce had been thrown from the wagon when it took the turn, but the murderer had stayed with it. Consequently there was but one inference to be drawn.

Thus far Darrel read with amused indifference. The paragraphs that followed, however, startled him and filled him with consternation.

The report went on to state that Scatterly, in returning from the War Eagle mine, had had a communication handed to him at the Half Way house. Usually he took no notice of anonymous letters, but in this particular case he had made an exception.

The communication had requested him to call at Kansas Joe's old cabin in Lost Horse coulee. He had gone there but, aside from evidences that the hut had been recently used, he had found nothing and no one. The letter was, therefore, looked upon as a hoax and Scatterly's aversion for unsigned messages was intensified.

Darrel threw aside the paper, lighted a cigar and leaned back in his chair. A throbbing fear was leaping along his nerves.

The cabin empty! Had Scatterly made a mistake and gone to the wrong place?

While possible this was hardly probable. Yet, if the sheriff had made no mistake in the cabin, what had become of McCloud?

Darrel got up and walked out of the hotel into the cooler air. His situation had become greatly complicated and the issue confronting him was very trying even to his iron nerves.

Should he retreat? he asked himself. It would be easy to close his account at the hotel and proceed to some other part of the country.

But to do that he must abandon his designs against Murgatroyd. Murgatroyd, the real murderer, would be left immune by Darrel's withdrawal from the scene.

That was the point that decided the fugitive. He would face the issue, hoping that Scatterly had made some mistake, hoping that no interruption would come before Murgatroyd's guilt had been proved, hoping that the ladies he was soon to meet would request nothing of him that would lead to his discovery—hoping everything, in fact, that seemed impossible.

When he re-entered the office he was his same calm, resolute self and had made up his mind to fling his defiance in the very teeth of Fate.

Early in the afternoon the coming of Mrs. Gorton and Miss Avery was announced by the clerk. Darrel was in his room and went at once to the public parlor on the second floor.

The two ladies were alone in the apartment and were seated near a window overlooking the street. One was rather stout and with a tinge of gray in her dark hair; the other was young, slender and with a face of rare loveliness.

Both rose and turned toward Darrel as he entered. The elder advanced a step.

"Mr. McCloud?" she asked.

"At your service, madam," he answered with a bow.

"I am Mrs. Gorton," went on the elder lady, presenting her hand with a cordial smile, "and my companion is my niece, Miss Avery."

There was a settled sadness in Miss Avery's face which touched Darrel to the heart and made him ashamed of the part he was playing. The difficulties of his assumed role were to commence with this moment, as he knew full well.

He barely touched Miss Avery's small white hand.

"It gives me great pleasure," said he, "to meet the friends of Lorry Ormsby."

"You have received Mr. Ormsby's letter?" queried Miss Avery.

"That came to hand several days ago."

"Here is another, Mr. McCloud," said Mrs. Gorton, tendering him a letter; "after you have read it, if you can spare the time we will tell you the nature of our errand to this part of the country. We are entire strangers here and are very grateful to Mr. Ormsby for directing us to you."

They resumed their seats and Darrel drew a chair near and excused himself while he read the communication from Ormsby. The envelope was sealed, which Darrel accounted strange if it contained simply a letter of introduction.

As he read, the eyes of the two ladies stole furtively to his face. They were not prepared for the sudden whiteness they saw there, the sharp, almost imperceptible compression of Darrel's thin lips, the convulsive movement of the slim, white fingers that held the sheet from which he was reading. Puzzled and interrogative glances passed between the elderly lady and her niece.

Darrel seemed abstracted. He held the letter long enough to have read it half a dozen times. The writing ran as follows:

Dear Junius: This will be handed you by Mrs. Gorton and Miss Avery. There is something about the man whom they are seeking which they do not know and which I do not care to have them know—yet awhile. In your own time and when you think best you may give them the information. Through private sources I have learned that the man has taken another name, and when these tactics are resorted to it is clear that something is wrong. Miss Avery has experienced much sorrow and I would not care to add one straw to her burden, if it could be helped. You understand, do you not? You will help them, I know, and please be a little tactful in what you do. The name now used by the one they desire to find is Sturgis, Jack Sturgis. He was last heard of at Sandy Bar, near Anaconda.

"Is there any bad news from Mr. Ormsby, Mr. McCloud?" asked Mrs. Gorton, in an agitated tone.

"We must not anticipate, Mrs. Gorton," answered Darrel, with an encouraging smile, as he put the letter away. "If you will tell me in what way I can serve you, I shall be most happy to do all I can."

"Thank you," came from Miss Avery, in a low voice. Then she looked toward her aunt as though desiring that she should make the necessary explanations.

"We have come here to find Elise's father," said Mrs. Gorton. "He has been absent from home for five years and during the last year no word whatever has been received from him. Naturally we can draw but one inference"—she cast a hasty glance in her companion's direction—"yet, in the absence of any positive knowledge, we cannot but have some hope."

Darrel bent his head thoughtfully on his hand. The next moment the girl's voice came to him tremulously.

"What would you advise us to do, Mr. McCloud?"

"Please describe your father to me," he returned, looking.

She did so. A glint darted into Darrel's eyes. Between the Sturgis he knew and the man described by Miss Avery there were material differences.

"Elise speaks of her father as she saw him last, five years ago," spoke up Mrs. Gorton. "He must have changed since he came west."

"You have not seen your father for five years?" asked Darrel, his eyes on the girl's face.

"No."

"And it has been a year since you heard from him?"

"Yes."

"From what part of Montana did his last letter come?"

"From Helena."

"Then do you not think that Helena would be the best place to go and search for him?"

"Mr. Ormsby has instituted some inquiries and thought it best for us to come here, meet you and, if you would be so good as to help us, go on to Sandy Bar."

In a measure, Ormsby had cut the ground out from under Darrel's feet. He had withheld from the girl the assumed name of her father but had named the locality where he might be found.

Ormsby was inconsistent. Not only that, but he had heaped upon Darrel the unforseen results of his inconsistency.

"What is your father's full name, Miss Avery?" Darrel inquired.

"Ezra Avery."

Again Darrel lapsed into silence.

"I shall do my utmost to help you," said he, finally, "and will make your cause my own. There are no other demands upon my time and I can give this my undivided attention. But I shall want you to agree to one thing beforehand."

"What is that, Mr. McCloud?" returned Mrs. Gorton.

"I shall want you to let me have entire charge of the search for Mr. Avery."

"We shall be grateful to you for relieving us of that responsibility," said the girl.

"I am a peculiar man, in some respects," resumed Darrel. "I shall put my heart and soul into this matter and you must trust my judgment implicitly. If I seem dilatory, or if I do things you cannot understand, will you continue to have confidence in me even though I offer no explanations?"

A puzzled look crossed the elder lady's face. Her companion, however, gave an affirmative answer.

"And I am to have complete charge," added Darrel; "everything is in my hands even to the point of communicating with the authorities. You have not spoken with any one in Anaconda concerning your mission?"

"We called yesterday to see the sheriff," said Mrs. Gorton, "but he was out of town."

"I will attend to everything," announced Darrel, briefly.

"We had intended going at once to Sandy Bar—" began Mrs. Gorton.

Darrel shook his head decidedly.

"It is a rough mining camp and you must not go there until such a move is absolutely necessary."

"We are to remain in Anaconda?" asked Miss Avery.

"For the present that will be best."

When they rose to leave both ladies thanked him again, the younger one impulsively giving her hand.

A sunny light all but dispelled the sadness of her face. Hope was struggling to assert itself and Darrel was the cause.

Long after they had left him he sat in a chair by the window, the fair, sorrowful features of the girl plainly before his eyes. Never before had he felt as he felt then.

He was involved in a hopeless tangle.

CHAPTER XII.

DARREL'S MONTH OF INACTION.

Four weeks followed, weeks of vacillation during which Darrel fenced with necessity in the effort to gain time. He saw Mrs. Gorton and Miss Avery almost daily, calling at the private boarding place where they had taken their lodgings.

Often he took them driving and they paid many visits to various mines in the surrounding country. And wherever they went there was but one question in the girl's anxious eyes.

Both the girl and her aunt were most patient. The dragging, unfruitful days must have told heavily upon them but they proved their trust in Darrel by refraining to question him in any manner.

Fatalism took insidious root in Darrel's brain during those four weeks. Hitherto he had been sufficient unto himself; now he was coming to believe that Fate knew thoroughly the end of the game and simply dallied with him.

There was a cause for this revulsion of principles. That cause lay with Elise Avery herself.

At first there was a wholesome, uplifting delight for Darrel in simply being near the girl. He would watch her covertly and, if detected, would shift his gaze guiltily, feeling like a thief.

He knew every graceful curve of her face, every fold of her soft, luminous hair, every movement of form or trick of manner. Her eyes opened mysterious voids, wide as Heaven and deep as space, set with vague delights that passed his understanding.

He did not arouse in her the same interest that she aroused in him. Not

continued on 4th page

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