



SYNOPSIS

Ben Elliott—from "Yonder"—comes into the lumbering town of Tineup, bringing an old man, Don Stuart, who had been eager to reach Tineup. Nicholas Brandon, the town's leading citizen, resents Stuart's presence, trying to force him to leave, and Elliott, resenting the act, knocks him down. Judge Able Armitage hires Ben to run the one lumber camp, the Hoot Owl, that Brandon has not been able to grab. This belongs to Dawn McManus, whose father has disappeared with a murder charge hanging over his head. Brandon sends his bully, Duval, to beat up Ben, and Ben throws him out of camp. Old Don Stuart dies, leaving a letter for Elliott, "to be used when the going becomes too tough." Ben refuses to read it at this time, believing he can win the fight by his own efforts. Fire in the mill, subdued, is found to have been incendiary. The Hoot Owl makes a contract for timber, that will provide money to tide it over. But there is a definite time limit. Ben discovers Dawn McManus is not a child, as he had supposed, but a beautiful young woman. The railroad bridge over which Ben's lumber must pass, is blown up. By superhuman efforts Ben builds a new bridge and himself drives a train over the rickety structure, making the delivery with only a few minutes to spare. Brandon compels a woman (known as "Lydia") who is in his power, to accuse Elliott of misconduct with a girl. She does so at a dance which Elliott and Dawn McManus attend. Dawn, apparently believing Ben guilty, leaves the dance without him. While walking in the woods, Elliott is fired on, and drops, seemingly dead, but his fall is a ruse to make his enemy believe his attempt has been successful.

CHAPTER X—Continued

After a moment he rose, went forward again and entered the shadows boldly. No one was there, for certain, but before he had gone more than a few paces he came on that which he sought: a snowshoe track, visible in the gloom because of the softness of the snow. Whoever had gone that way had sunk deeply.

He followed this out of the thick timber to a little clearing. The trail was not visible in the darkness so he struck a match and holding it cupped in one hand, bent low.

The flare showed the track of a long, narrow shoe plainly and as he moved the tiny torch along toward its tip he stopped all movement. The match burned out. He moved on to the next track and lighted another. He examined several of the imprints made by the shoe. Then he went as rapidly as possible back down the slope to the road and started on to camp.

After supper Ben called Bird-Eye Blaine to one side. "I'd like to have you harness the supply team and spend an evening in town," he said.

The little barn boss cocked an inquisitive eye. "Just in town, mister Elliott? Or fer somethin' special?"

"Something special. . . . But no one else is to know. What I want to find out is this: Who is wearing a pair of Canadian snowshoes with the webbing in the toe torn so it makes a hole about this shape."

Quickly he sketched a rough outline on a leaf of his notebook. Bird-Eye scanned it and nodded. "It was after midnight when Ben Elliott roused from his sleepless bed to hear Bird-Eye speaking to his team outside. He crawled out of his blankets and opened the office door to let the other in, but before he asked any questions lighted a lamp.

"Well, how about it?"—as he replaced the chimney. Bird-Eye looked at him narrowly. "I found th' shoes," he said with an emphatic nod. "Nd I found out who they be! They're the property av' wan Red Bart Delaney, a celebrated killer from somewheres in Canada!"

From the second small bedroom separated from the office by a board partition, a bed creaked sharply. Elliott did not hear it. "So that's it!" he said softly. "Yis! That's ut! Th' presence av' a rattlesnake lokke Red Bart in th' community don't forecast nawthing but th' hottest kind av' trouble! Ye've heard av' him, ain't it?"

"Yes, I have. He was mixed up in that spruce war on the Zing-Wauk. A hired killer." "Killer is roight! 'Nd what may be a-doin' in these parts?" Elliott did not reply to that question. "What else did you find out?" he asked. "Well, he brought his stinkin' presence into Tineup Wednesday night on its own two stinkin' feet! He's favorin' Joe Piette's hotel. Te' snowshoes was in th' office 'nd it

come up so's I didn't have to seem curious to find out whose they was. He's here lookin' fer cedar, he says. But it gives a body a lot av' bother wonderin' what his rale reason moight be. Lyin' 's as natural av' breathin' to th' loikes."

"I can tell you," Ben said. "He's gunning for me, Bird-Eye." "Saints! . . . I thought ut, I did! Ah, me b'y—"

"Yes, he started today. I was shot at with a rifle two miles up the road just at sundown. The man who shot at me wore a snowshoe with the web broken. He wouldn't be lending his snowshoes."

Bird-Eye stood motionless and silent for a moment before he spoke. "Thin th' sooner we give him both barrels av' somethin', th' safer ye'll be, Mister Elliott! He's a hard chunk, him. It's Nick Brandon's work, who's tried everything else 'nd who'll not refuse to try murder to get ye down, Benny b'y!"

"Likely ye're right," Ben said and rubbed his chin with a knuckle. "But we'd have to prove that, first. There's nothing to worry about, now we know the man's here to get me. Likely he thought he got me. Still there, was he? Um. . . . Well, that's something to think over, Bird-Eye. You better hit for camp, and get some sleep. I may call you in the forenoon."

Bird-Eye sniffed and twisted his head gravely and after adding imprecations on Nicholas Brandon and warning Ben to stay close to the office, departed.

He could be heard unblanketing his team and climbing into the sleigh; and when the frosty runners screamed in departure sounds came from that second bedroom behind the partition, the door opened and John Martin stood looking out. His dark eyes held on Ben Elliott, anxious and troubled.

"I couldn't help hearing," he said simply. "Do you mind?" "Of course not, John. Looks like lively times!"—with a grin.

"It's none of my affairs Elliott, but I'm an older man than you, I've seen trouble. . . . a-plenty." His voice dropped significantly, as though old wounds were being opened. "I've heard of Delaney. I can't help but think Bird-Eye's advice is good. Swear out a warrant for him the first thing. This is a time for caution. It'll do you no good to take risks."

"I'll not walk into any traps, but if Brandon thinks he can make me hunt my hole—"

"Oh, Brandon!" The cry was bitter and Martin threw his arms wide in a gesture of helplessness. "You've got to watch him as you've never watched a man in your life. Why, son, you don't know, you don't dream, of the ends he'll go to!"

"But I thought you didn't know him," Ben said, puzzled. "I thought you said you were a stranger to this country."

"Yes. But stories travel. And isn't your experience today enough to convince anyone of the man's ruthlessness?"

"Oh, sure," Ben agreed, but still wondering at Martin's mood. "You're right. He'll stop at nothing, not even murder. And I agree with you that he's got to be watched. But if I ran into my burrow or didn't try to get at the bottom of this thing, he'd gain part of what he's after, you see. No, that can't be done."

He rose and began to pace the floor. "And it's not only the Hoot Owl, now, that's at stake. He's mixed up in more important matters than just property. He caught me foul where it hurt. . . . hurt!" Martin, following him with his eyes, winced. "He's used a woman to come between me and the finest girl that ever walked the earth!" Martin looked away as Ben confronted him, almost as one will avert his face from a painful sight. "Lastly he brings a hired killer to polish me off. Darned if I know what to expect next. But one thing he can bank on: I won't run. I'll drive him into the open if I can by hook or crook, but I won't run!"

"No, I know you won't. But I wish. . . . Oh, how I wish you'd counsel with some one else, with Able or anyone. You're young, you're in danger. . . . And this matter you just mention: Can't you think of Dawn a little? If you love her can't you see that she has a right to believe that you will protect yourself?" The man's voice had fallen to a broken whisper. He held out both hands in appeal and tears sprang into his eyes. This man, this mature, quiet gentleman, this stranger

to the country, begging him with tears in eyes and voice to consider Dawn McManus struck Ben dumb-founded.

"Oh, it's only that you've shown yourself to be so decent," Martin said after a moment, emotions under better control. "I hate to see you putting yourself in danger."

"I won't stick my head into any noose," Ben replied. "Lord, it's late. We'll need clear heads to meet this situation. Better get into the old blankets."

But he did not sleep at once. He lay awake a long time, thinking of Red Bart Delaney and Brandon and wondering how he could prove their relationship. . . . And speculating on Martin's outbursts, the man's keen hatred of Brandon, whom he probably had never seen, his intense interest in Dawn McManus. . . . Something strange and unnatural was there, Elliott told himself. Still, he added, you could stake your last hope on a man like John Martin.

Early the next forenoon the merchants and traders and loafers in main thoroughfare saw something to nip their attention.

Ben Elliott came driving into town at a spanking trot, his team of alert drivers coated with frost. This was nothing unusual. But when he brought them to a crunching halt before the bank building, over which Nicholas Brandon worked and lived, jumped out, threw blankets over their backs and tied them to a post, a few necks were craned.

Throughout the evening before Brandon had gorged himself on a sense of relief. At eight he had passed Bart Delaney on the street. None had been about to notice that although Brandon appeared only to overtake and pass the man that, in reality, they spoke briefly and cautiously.

"Well?" "In his tracks. . . . Two mile above th' mill."

Inside, Brandon seethed with a savage exultation. He crossed the street, drunk with the feeling of relief, mounted to his office and drank to his own success. . . . And drank again. For hours he sat at his desk, whisky bottle at his elbow and when he went down the hallway to his bedroom at the rear he carried the bottle with him.

His first move for the day, once in his office next day, was to draw the cork of a fresh flask and drink deeply. A growing warmth ran through him. That was better. It was not comfortable to wake up, thinking of a man lying lifeless on the snow. . . . at your orders.

Soon, now, word would be coming into town from Hoot Owl, tragic, final word. He must be in shape to meet the news dispassionately. No one would know his part in the killing! none would guess. Still, it would not be easy to have people saying that Ben Elliott was dead. . . . Elliott is dead; Elliott is dead. . . . The words spun about in his mind, a savage chant, and Brandon wanted to be glad but could not. Elliott was gone, though. The Hoot Owl was at his mercy and Dawn. . . . Dawn!

And then he turned to the opening door. . . . Ben Elliott was standing there and smiling good-naturedly at him.

But dead men do not stand up. . . . Not men left dead on the snow. . . . Men whose life you have had taken do not smile. . . . Men stiff on the snow cannot smile. . . . This combination of truths coupled in Brandon's swirling mind and struck him cold. This could be no man, then; this was an apparition, this was—

And then whatever it was spoke. "Good morning, Brandon!" Elliott spoke naturally and easily, and closed the door behind him. Dead men do not speak; ghosts do not open and close doors—they pass through them.

And Nicholas Brandon, gathering his faculties, lurched to his feet, panting and clenching the edge of the desk. "Good morning," he said in a hoarse gasp. "Good. . . ."

Ben Elliott laughed bitterly. "What's the difficulty, Brandon? Didn't you expect to see me this morning?" "Why. . . . I. . . . That is, I thought—"

Ben stepped close and dropped his voice nearly to a whisper.

"You thought I wouldn't be walking today? Was 'nat it?" "Not walking? I don't know what you're talking about." The older man's self-control was coming back rapidly, now that his fright had passed away.

"I just came in to get matters straight between us, Brandon. Several serious things have happened to the Hoot Owl but in spite of them the Hoot Owl is booming; now, I presume, I can look for things to happen to me. Before anything does—because I'm not rash enough to be cocksure that it won't—I want you to get me straight."

The last vestige of his smile was gone by then. He stood spread-legged, hands locked behind his back, eyes boring into Brandon's gaze.

"I'm not interested in—"

"But you'll listen! You'll listen or I'll choke you until you'll beg for the opportunity to listen, Brandon! You'll listen to me this morning and it'll be the first and last time."

"I know a great deal, I can prove but little. I know that you started in to run me out by sending Duval to clean up my camp. Next, you tried to cripple my operation by having a firebug touch off the mill."

"Don't go too far, young man!" "I won't. The pits of hell are the inside limits for you, Brandon!"

"After that, you timed it nicely and blew up my trestle. You almost had us two or three times. But you topped! The Hoot Owl is up on its knees, will be on its feet in a month if we keep going and it'll be sitting on the world by the time breakup hits us. All you've done to the job has only helped it."

"That's that! Next you try to get me, thinking, probably, that if you knock the skipper off the bridge the craft will founder for certain. You're wrong, there. You can't lick my men, because they're too many for you; you can't stop the Hoot Owl by getting me out of the picture. But if you want to keep on trying, it's your own funeral. I've only one thing to ask of you: try to play the white man, Brandon, and fight your own fights!"

His face was dark with rage, now, and he emphasized his last words by downward thrusts of clenched hands along his thighs.

Brandon smiled lightly. "You're a queer young man," he remarked. "You dream in broad daylight and with your eyes open."

"A peculiarly detailed dream, Brandon! I've said all I have to say about the job and about myself but there is another matter left to be mentioned while I'm here. I won't even utter her name in your hearing, but any man who would pull a trick like you did and involve a girl. . . . Brandon, a snake's belly is sky-high compared to you!"

And that touched the well-springs of rage that had been dammed back until the moment. "You fool!" the man said heavily. The words came like the first break in a levee; slow, sluggish words. . . . And then, like the following toss of foam was the frothing rage in his scream. "You fool! I'll drive you out of this country! I'll hang your operation up for the crows to pick! I'll string the bones of this timber and your own bones across this country!"

He stopped, sobbing for breath, and his teeth clicked in an agony of passion. "Dawn? Not mention her name? Well, I will. . . . She's mine, you fool, body and soul! She's been mine for years. . . . Because she smiled at you, because she played with you don't think she's interested, fool! She's—"

He swayed backward as Elliott lurched toward him, but their bodies did not lock. White and trembling, Ben stayed his own rush. "No! . . . Don't want to brawl over her," he choked. "But if you mention her name to me again I'm likely to lose my head and tear your hide off your carcass!"

His rage was so high, so holy, that the fear it inspired carried through Brandon's frenzy and the man stood silent, perhaps in awe. Ben relaxed.

"Now," he said quietly, "I've just one thing to ask, Brandon. It's this: fight your own battles!"

He turned on his heel and slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XI BEN began unblanketing his team with the haste of high temper but before he had finished Able Armitage hailed him from across the street and came hurrying through the rutted snow. The old justice's face was marked by an expression of concern and he came close before he spoke. "I hear Red Bart Delaney's in town."

BOTH HUMOR AND POETRY EVINCED IN PLACE NAMES

The southern mountaineer's whimsical humor is seen not only in some of his songs and hoe-downs but in place names commemorating some jest, some episode more or less grimly comical or tragic—Broke-Jug creek, Tear-Breeches ridge, Chunky-Gal mountain, Seldom-Seen hollow, Rip-Shin ridge—ouch! How vividly that recalls certain scrambles through stony thickets—Burnt-Shirt mountain, Jerk 'Em Tight, Hanging Dog creek, Headforemost mountain, Bore-Auger creek, Fiery-Gizzard creek, the Devil's Courthouse, and so on.

In Cumberland county, Tennessee, two beautiful brawling streams unite whose names are No Business creek and How Come You creek. Undoubtedly, there is a story back of each name.

But the mountaineer is often poetic, too, and gracefully descriptive in his place names. The touch of melancholy in his nature is evidenced by the frequent recurrence of such names as Lonesome and Troublesome. Desolation, Defeated, Poor Fork, Kingdom Come, Falling Water and Lost creek are significant names of streams. Crazy Dome, Balsom Cone, the Black Brothers, Lone Bald Thunderhead, Little Snowbird, Grandfather; Hawksbill; Graybeard and Wine Spring Bald

are all mountains lyrically and descriptively named. I asked a mountain man in North Carolina whether a certain bold promontory had a name, and I have a pleasant memory of the slow lift of his eyes to where it towered 1,000 feet above us, and the soft drawl of his mellow, low-pitched voice as he answered: "Yas, hit's called the Winter Star."—Alvin F. Harlow in the Saturday Evening Post.

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