



SYNOPSIS

Ben Elliott—from "Yonder"—comes into the lumbering town of Tincup, bringing an old man, Don Stuart, who had been eager to reach Tincup. 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. A little sleuthing proves the would-be killer to be Red Bart Delaney, notorious Canadian desperado.

CHAPTER XI—Continued

"Benny, your way of doing things scares me! Why, this can't go on. It mustn't! It's your own affair, for sure, when he tried to shoot you down, but maybe, perhaps, possibly, I'm going to beg you to be careful. So long as Delaney's in the country you've got to keep low. Get back to camp; stay there; let us pick some man I can trust to follow Bart and Brandon night and day so you'll not be caught!"

"No," Ben shook his head resolutely. "I'll go on about my business as I should. I've never run yet and don't like to start any fast footwork now."

"But it's your life that's at stake, Ben! Don't be silly. That's what recklessness is: downright silly! That's not like you. Why, not taking precautions in this thing is like monkeying with a high tension wire."

"No good, Able. I couldn't hold up my head if I hid out after the play I've made."

So Able was forced to give up after a time and shuffled up the street, drawing off his mitten again and rubbing his face briskly with his palm.

He had only reached his office and was unlocking the door when Aunt Em, walking grimly as if with a definite purpose, approached.

"Good morning," he began.

"Forget the palaver, Able Armitage!" the woman said sharply. "You're in trouble. So are we all, maybe. That's why I came to see you. Is it true what they say that this Red Bart Delaney has showed up here in Tincup?"

"As true as disease or death or anything else unpleasant."

"That's what I'd heard! Do I have to guess why he's come?"

Able untied his scarf and shook his head sadly.

"No, Em. Your first guess will be right. And he took a shot at Benny yesterday!"

"And missed, I'd judge from the look of him just now. But if he's still here there'll be a next time; and he won't miss then. Did you do your duty and send the boy to some safe place?"

Able sighed and told her of his talk with Ben.

"So you couldn't make him listen to reason!" she muttered. "Well, if you can't, I can't. And, as falling, there's only one other who would have a ghost of a show."

"Dawn?"

She nodded. "Dawn could. But she won't. . . . She won't go to him no. She wouldn't even listen to me talk about him, she's in such a state. She's up to her ears in love with Ben Elliott or I've got three legs! And then to have that scandalous woman do what she did and upset it all!"

She sat down heavily in a chair and drew a great breath.

"I don't have to ask you or any other man about Ben Elliott, Able! I know the clean and decent folk when I see 'em. I'd bet my reputation as a Christian woman on that bay! That piece of play acting at the dance was some of Nick

Brandon's work, you can bet your last red cent! Why, Able, that man's worse than ever I thought! My, oh my!"

"Well, what I'm gettin' at is this: The boy's in danger of bein' murdered every minute of day and night unless he takes your advice. There's no one left to try to talk him into being careful but Dawn. And how am I going to get her to see her duty when she goes into a cryin' fit every time his name's mentioned? Yes, sir. Every time she hears his name."

"She doesn't yet see that the affair was a put-up job, then?"

"See? She can't see anything. Able Armitage! Put yourself in her place. Suppose you were a young girl who's had the things to bear that she has all her life; and suppose you fell in love for the first time; and suppose that young man was accused of such nastiness right in public with everybody listening and gawping? Would you stop to figure that the reason he seemed guilty was natural? That the thing was so far fetched from the truth and such a shock that he was all kerfummoxed? I should say you wouldn't! You'd do just what she's doin'; make yourself all sick with chills and fever by cryin'."

She twitched at the skirts of her cloak irritably and glared at the old justice as though he were a sworn enemy instead of a friend.

"What ails her is shock. She ain't got over the shock yet and every time his name or anything else about him is mentioned it sets her off again. She'll get over it, give her time. But then she'll be so humiliated to think she didn't use her reason that she won't be herself for another spell. There ain't any time to lose. She should patch up her misunderstanding with him right today—right this hour—and use her influence to persuade him to keep low. But how it's to be done I'd like to know. For Lord's sake, Able, ain't you got a single suggestion?"

The justice had been stuffing light wood into his stove during this. Now he touched a match to the tinder, opened the drafts and stood with his hands behind him, rusty overcoat unbuttoned and drooping, deep in thought.

"It's difficult to get anyone in her state to use reason. Maybe the shock of knowing that Ben's life is in danger would be a counter irritant to this other shock. Maybe not. If the affair of last week could be cleared up, if Dawn could be shown that this Lydia woman was only carrying out a plan . . . But I wonder . . ."

Aunt Em stiffened in her chair. She looked hard at Able and her eyes narrowed a trifle.

"You see," he resumed, "if the girl—"

"Hold on, Able Armitage!" she cut in, holding up a hand in warning. "Hold on, now! I've got to think. . . . Got to think, I tell you! And I can't think while you carry on your gabble! You leave me alone, now. . . . Keep your tongue still. . . . They say a woman's tongue is hung in the middle and loose at both ends. . . . But . . . Yum . . ." As she pressed one hand over her eyes her words dwindled so unintelligible mumbblings.

"I've got it!" she cried excitedly after a moment. "I've got it, now! You stay right here, Able! You stay until I come back. If it works, it works. . . . If it don't, it'll be time to talk some more!"

She moved resolutely to the door, left the office and strode down the street. On past the bank, the post office, the pool room. . . . On beyond all the stores, on down to the depot.

There, on the platform she stood a long interval staring across the tracks to that short row of houses on Section Thirty-Seven. The station agent came out of the office and looked at Em in surprise.

"Hello!" he cried. "What brings you down here before—"

"Homer," she cut in grimly, "in which one of them nasty places does this Lydia woman live?"

"Why-why. . . . Why, how should I know?" he evaded as a red flush crept up from his collar. "In the one at this end, I think. I'm not sure, of course. . . . I think she does, though. . . . She . . ."

But he no longer had a listener. Resolutely, slowly with something like defiant majesty, the woman crossed the tracks, with never another word to her informant and never a look to right or left. Her head was up, her mouth set, and her long nose wrinkled as if at a disgusting odor. A woman up by the stores shaded her eyes and peered at the moving figure and

stared and stopped. Aunt Em Coburn, headed for Thirty-Seven! Why, it couldn't be!

But Aunt Em mounted the steps. She rapped at length and vigorously on the scarred panel of the door. She went within, leaving a dozen long-distance watchers to wonder.

It was long before she emerged and then . . . Ah, then Tincup had a sight to see, a subject for speculation! For by Aunt Em's side moved the woman Lydia, collar of her fur coat high about her face as if to hide the traces of tears which hastily applied powder could not eradicate.

Tears from those hard eyes? Nothing less! For women know women and before Aunt Em had talked to this outcast five minutes she had discovered the weakness in her shame, the clean spot left in her heart. And how Emma Coburn could talk! She talked that clean spot to a growing, glowing, glorious thing. She talked Lydia out of her house, across the tracks; talked her into that slow, unashamed, almost flagrant march up the main street; talked her out of all but one look of misgiving at the windows of Nicholas Brandon's offices. . . . And around the corner and in beneath the hemlocks which whispered above the snug white house. They entered, where Dawn McManus had hidden since the woman's words sent her flying from the dance hall to the sanctuary of Aunt Em's understanding arms.

All the way out to camp Dawn snuggled close again Able in his worn old buffalo coat. Now and again she trembled a bit; once she cried softly a few minutes. But much of the time she talked.

"To think it was the man I used to call Uncle who did that thing!" she cried. "Why haven't you told me, Able? Why haven't you warned me?"

"What he's done, what he's been, what he is, were no things for you, Dawn, girl. I've just tried . . . to stand between you and many unpleasant things. You've had your share as it was."

"I could have stood this one



more," she replied, stoutly enough. "It hasn't been so bad these last few years, knowing that everybody thinks my father a murderer. I'd just gotten myself above that and now . . . and now . . ."

"What now?" Able asked gently. She looked at him through tears.

"When a man loves a girl, that girl can't let herself love him, can she, when she's under a cloud herself? She can't bring a man's children into the world and have them whispered about as the grandchildren of a murderer?"

"Dawn! Dawn, girl, don't think that! Why, it's—"

"But it's so, Able! I don't want to talk about it. All I can do for Ben now is to let him know how weak I was to doubt him and to use any influence I may have to protect him from this terrible danger. I will do that; I must do that because it is duty. But it must stop there. It can't go on, you see. Not while I have nothing more than just my faith in my father's good name."

Able, the wise man that he was, did not force the argument. He brought his team to a halt before the Hoot Owl office, gave the reins to Dawn and stepped out.

Martin, the bookkeeper, was the only occupant of the place.

"Where's Ben?" he asked.

The bearded man looked over his shoulder, recognized Able and then his gaze went past the man to the waiting cutter where Dawn sat.

"He's . . ." It seemed as though Martin's voice failed after that word. He half started from his chair and the pen, dropped from flexed fingers, rolled across the ledger sheet. He made a faint sound and in his eyes appeared an expression that startled Able.

"What's wrong, Martin?" he asked in alarm, stepping quickly into the room. "Sick?"

"No . . . all right now," the other said, as if with great effort.

"Ben? In the mill, I think."

He picked up his pen, then, and bent over his work.

Able crossed the mill-yard looking for Ben and as he went Martin rose cautiously from his chair, moved quietly to be in line with the window and stared for a long interval at the girl huddled in the robes.

His hands worked and his breath was uneven.

"Dawn is here to see you," Able said simply as he encountered Ben. "She had me bring her out so she could talk to you. She's waiting over by the office."

Elliott stood hesitant for an instant; then turned and walked swiftly along the pond. He gave no sign of recognition as he approached the cutter; made no salutation as he came near the girl who sat watching him so steadily. He only spoke her name, when he was at her side. She gave him a small, gloved hand and smiled wanly.

"I have come to say many things, Ben," she began in a strange, strained voice. "To beg forgiveness, to beg other things . . . perhaps to explain a little."

"A week ago tonight,"—struggling, now, to hold her voice steady—"I ran out of the dance hall and on home, thinking that that woman was honest. The time since then, until noon today, has been a nightmare."

"Lydia came to my house at noon. She explained everything. Aunt Em brought her. Lydia told me everything. . . . It was Mr. Brandon who thought out the plan and forced her to do it under threats of some sort. She didn't tell us what the threats were but left our house for the train and is gone from Tincup forever. . . . And I've come to tell you how miserable I feel to think that I was weak enough to act as Mr. Brandon seemed to be sure I would act. . . ."

Relief was singing through Elliott's relief and a great joy, lifting him above rage for Brandon.

"Oh, I'm glad!" he said earnestly. "I've . . . Why, it completely knocked me off my pins! Dawn, it's been terrible for you but . . . but this makes me so happy!"

"I'm happy because you are happy," she said, but something in her tone and expression dampened his enthusiasm, checked his soaring spirits. She was so calm, so steady, so restrained; her mood was not at all that of one who comes joyously to wipe out heart-breaking misunderstanding. "And I'll never forgive myself for . . . for falling into the trap that was set for me, Ben!"

"Why shouldn't you? Any girl would have felt as you did. . . . But it's explained, now. Let's forget it and begin where we left off and find peace and—"

The sharp shake of her head and the quick withdrawal of her hand cut him off.

"There are sterner things to think of, first; quite different things, Ben. That is why I came out here, to talk to you about Bart Delaney. Able has told me what happened yesterday. You don't take it seriously enough. Keep safe until you're certain that the danger is past."

"Hide and skulk while other men protect me? A man can't do that, Dawn! I'll be on my guard, of course. But I can't run away from anybody who is trying to strike from behind. What would these boys here on the job think of me if I did? If I do the safe thing and think of my own skin, some of our workers will tumble to the fact that I've no more courage than most of them, less than plenty. I can't let them down, you see, and still keep my standing in their eyes."

"It isn't worth it, Ben! It's my job, my property you're taking these risks for. It isn't fair to me!"

"I can argue that. I'm not anxious to be put out of the picture yet a while. I'll keep my eyes open. I've already made the move that should stop Delaney from trying me again. Able and the others have gotten you all in a flutter, Dawn. Don't worry. I'm coming to Tincup tonight and I'm going to appear to be thinking about nothing but the errands I have to do. Every second, I'll be on the watch for a crooked move from anybody. I promise you that. And when I've shown myself to people I'll come to see you and talk you into the same way of looking at this situation."

She shook her head.

"I'm asking two things of you. The first is to stay here; the other is not to come to see me. . . . Please!"

She put a hand on his with that plea, and he frowned.

"I can understand your being a little timid about having me around town but I can convince you that I'm right. It's Brandon or me, now, you see. If I run, he wins. . . . But this other: Dawn, don't you want me to see you?"

The girl's lips worked.

"No," she said, ever so faintly.

"No. . . . Oh, please don't argue with me, Ben! Please don't come to see me. You don't understand. You may never understand. . . . But I'm begging you from the bottom of my heart not to come and see me again!"

"No, I don't understand. It's . . . why, its . . ." He laughed aloud at his own bewilderment and Able, in the near distance, mistook that laugh born of distress for one of relief and came toward them.

"Well, have you two got matters cleared up?" he asked.

Dawn nodded silently.

"Some things are cleared up," Elliott said. "But there are others. . . . Dawn, won't you explain?"

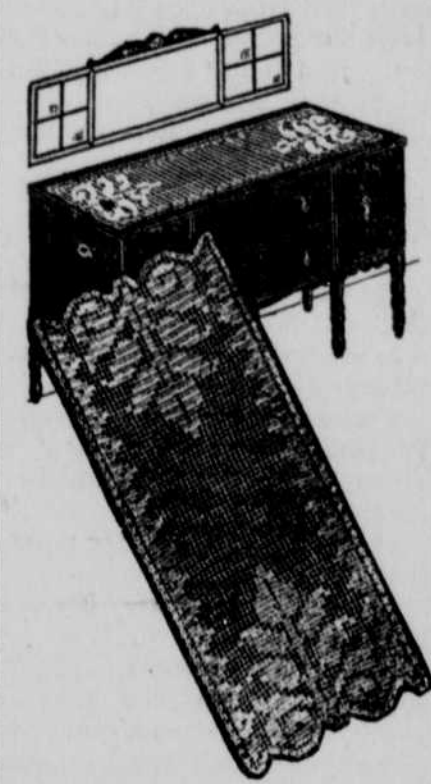
The girl turned her face to Able.

"I'm ready to go home now," she said weakly.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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